The Gods & The Evens

By L. B. Meads

15—

Kathleen Moore.

THE ODDS AND THE EVENS.

The Odds

and

The Evens

BY

L. T. MEADE

AUTHOR OF 'LIGHT O' THE MORNING,' 'THE GIRLS OF ST WODE'S,' 'WILD KITTY,' 'GIRLS NEW AND OLD,' 'BETTY: A SCHOOL-GIRL,' ETC.

WITH TEN ILLUSTRATIONS BY
PERCY TARRANT

W. J. GAGE & CO., LIMITED.
TORONTO.

PS2859
S82
033
1899
Juv
***

Entered according to Act of Parliament of Canada, in the office of the Minister of Agriculture, by THE W. J. GAGE COMPANY (Limited), in the year one thousand eight hundred and ninety-nine.

CONTENTS.

PAGE

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT 1

Book I.

EASTER HOLIDAYS.

CHAP.

I. THE ARRIVAL OF THE IMPISH GIRL 6
II. THE CARLINGFORDS AT HOME 20
III. THE NAUGHTY LITTLE SISTERS 34
IV. VEAL PIES AND COLD SAUSAGES 53
V. A DECLARATION OF WAR 62
VI. FOR A WEEK 70
VII. NINA THE INCORRIGIBLE 77
VIII. THE DECLARATION 90
IX. A KISS FROM MOTHER 102
X. RULES OF WAR 111

Book II.

SUMMER HOLIDAYS.

XI. A STARTLING ARRANGEMENT 116
XII. PREPARATIONS 131
XIII. PATIENCE LAUGHED 146
XIV. SPONGE-CAKES 159
XV. JACK-IN-THE-BOX 173
XVI. WITH THE GIPSIES 189

CHAP. PAGE
XVII. 'IT CANNOT GO ON' 202
XVIII. THE SPELLING GIRL 214
XIX. A BETWIXT 231
XX. HEPSIBAH LEE 242
XXI. A STORMY HEART 257
XXII. THE SPELLING LESSON 271
XXIII. QUEEN OF THE FAIR 288

Book III.

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS.

XXIV. HALF A-CROWN 304
XXV. 'DON'T BE SILENT' 318
XXVI. 'LET'S FIND THE SILLIEST SHOP' 331
XXVII. 'A THRILL-DOWN-YOUR-BACK' 349
XXVIII. THE SOVEREIGN 363
XXIX. A DESPERATE UNDERTAKING 377
XXX. TO THE RESCUE 391
XXXI. IN THE SNOW 402
XXXII. THE END OF IT ALL 411

List of Illustrations.

PAGE

The two queens met in the little copse at the bottom of the front lawn ..... *Frontispiece*

Peach was hoisting the white flag of victory..... 9

The little girl darted a few feet away, and presently was pirouetting wildly round..... 47

Nina uttered her cruel words without the smallest change of colour..... 83

'If you think I 'm going to bend these knees you 're fine and mistook'..... 142

Rosaleen caught hold of her hand and looked at the bangles..... 190

The next instant that sovereign was in the pocket of her little red frock..... 253

'Now you are our Queen, and you shall come and sit on the throne in the very middle of the fair'..... 298

'Speak out, missy; you were after no good, I 'll be bound'..... 369

The child was lying on her back; her arms were stretched out wide; . . . her eyes were closed..... 404

THE ODDS AND THE EVENS.

WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT.

THIS is a story of a great battle—how it began, how it continued, the many adventures and excitements and heart-burnings and miseries which it caused, and the final victory—but on which side I will not say. It is called, to this day, in Priory Square, the Battle of the Odds and Evens.

At the time when the story begins there was no battle, but everything was going smoothly and harmoniously; not, of course, without those little reverses which occur in the best-regulated families, but there was nothing to make a commotion or to call the attention of the neighbours to the affair.

The children loved each other in the inconsequent, happy-go-lucky style of healthy children. They were glad to meet, on the whole, and sorry to part, on the whole; and there would never have been any battle, and nothing very serious would have occurred, had it not been for the presence of Nina.

But I must begin the story right away; and, first, I shall have to describe the Freres and the Carlingfords, as without that description what I have to say might not be intelligible.

Dr Frere had a large house just at the corner of Priory Square. Priory Square was situated in a midland town in England, which, for the purposes of this narrative, I will call Warrencliffe. It was a large town, numbering some thousands of inhabitants; but it was not too large for the children in Priory Square to walk to the country when they pleased; and it was not too crowded to admit of shady, comfortable, and luxurious gardens—gardens with high walls, well stocked with fruit-trees, and with gay parterres full of flowers of every sort and description, with tennis-courts and hockey-courts. All the houses in Priory Square were large and substantial and handsome-looking. There was a sense of space about them; and, although the square was in the midst of a large town, it had

very few brown effects, for the trees in the centre kept their green until quite late in the season, and the Freres and the Carlingfords in particular could climb their stately branches and shout to each other from amidst their plentiful foliage.

The Carlingfords had no father, which made their case, when the great fight began, all the sadder and more complicated, and decidedly put the Freres very much in the wrong. Mrs Carlingford was a widow; she had plenty of money, and lived in the house on the opposite side of the square to the Freres—not so far away but that, before the fight began, they could have all kinds of communications of the telegraphic order going on from attic to attic.

But now I must describe the families themselves.

To begin with the Freres. There were two very pretty girls. They were so like that it was difficult to know one from the other; they were hearty, happy, healthy children, aged fifteen and fourteen, and their names were Prudence and Patience. Dr Frere had come of an old Quaker stock; and he liked, as he expressed it, to give names with meanings in them to his children. The girls were, of course, never known as anything but Prue and Patty. They had brown eyes and rosy cheeks and brown hair and dimpling mouths and rounded limbs, and

were so healthy that Dr Frere used to say that they were almost wasted on a doctor, as he could never make experiments on them, or dose them with tonics, or anything else.

There were no boys in the Frere family. Prue and Patty came first; and then a long way below them came a little girl called Rosaleen. She was a dark and very handsome child, aged eleven, and was called after the famous Dark Rosaleen, so well known to all lovers of Irish ballads. The next girl was called Amélie. She was only a year younger, and when this story begins was ten. Rosaleen was generally spoken of as Rose, and Amélie as Amy. Thus there were four girls in the Frere family, and they were known in the time of the great fight as the Evens.

Now the Carlingfords were, of course, the Odds; and this can be soon explained when a little is said with regard to the chief members of the household. The grown-ups had nothing to say to the great battle, and for a long time did not even know of its existence. To begin with the youngest in that house: there were twins—a boy and a girl aged ten, who went by the names of Fred and Peach; and there were two big boys called Kenneth and Malcolm, aged thirteen and fourteen; and then there was Nina, who was the cause of all the mischief,

and who was the most provocative, fascinating, irritating, wild, impish girl in the world, and she was aged fifteen.

In the Carlingford household there were five children in all. In the Frere household there were four. There was no earthly reason why they should not have lived in the greatest friendship and good-will, but they did not; and this story is all about why they did not, and how they did not, and the rest.

Book I.

EASTER HOLIDAYS.

CHAPTER I.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE IMPISH GIRL.

INA CARLINGFORD had been away in Brussels for two years. She had gone there when she was thirteen, and had stayed for the first six months with an aunt, who had looked after her, and then had been placed at an excellent school in the Avenue Louise. Her coming home was a great event, more particularly as it was very doubtful whether she would go back again.

Kenneth and Malcolm were strictly of the opinion that she would be very troublesome, and give herself airs, and would interfere with them in their different vocations. They went to an excellent

Grammar School within a stone's-throw of Priory Square, and had many companions amongst the boys, and had the busy life which falls to the lot of the modern schoolboy. They were not particularly elated at the thought of Nina's return; but the twins, Fred and Peach, were delighted, and spent their time making many preparations for the great event.

Nina had, all to herself, a very small room at the top of the big house. Her mother had given her this bedroom soon after her father's death, and when she was still quite a little child. Nina had ornamented the room after her own fashion; and, as she never did anything like anybody else, it had a quaintness and charm about it which can be better felt than described. It was not, strictly speaking, a pretty room. The walls, instead of being papered in the ordinary way with the ordinary modern and æsthetic paper, were covered all over with pictures. A good many of these pictures had been drawn by the little girl herself, and a good many by her favourite companions; but some had been cut out of the illustrated papers. One side of the room was devoted entirely to the representation of animals—animals of all sorts and sizes, of all kinds and degrees. Another wall represented fairies, gnomes, and brownies and sprites—some coloured, some in black-and-white. There were

flights of fairies over flowery landscapes, and there were wicked-looking brownies trying to upset the housemaid's work at night, and there were brownies and fairies who had taken for the time being the form of cats and dogs—every kind, some impish, some lovely, disported themselves on one of the walls of Nina's bedroom.

Then there was the wall which was devoted to young-ladyhood—girls dating back, some of them, many centuries, girls of the present day, girls young and girls old, girls sad and girls glad, girls of every sort; but the fourth wall was the most exciting of all, for it represented all sorts and degrees of subjects: battles, in which men lay wounded where they had fallen; wonderful landscapes, some of great beauty, some of equal gloom; lovers in the act of parting; husbands and wives, with all sorts of stories written on their faces; brides and bridegrooms at the hymeneal altar; fathers and mothers watching the sports of their offspring. And Nina had so skilfully grouped the pictures on this special wall that they seemed to form a focus in the middle, and to go deep in, so that your eye seemed to be travelling over miles and miles of country. Altogether it was most effective and extraordinary, and was considered a work of genius by Ken and Malcolm, and also by the twins, Fred and Peach.

L.

eapes, and
ng to upset
there were
r the time
kind, some
es on one

devoted to
of them,
girls young
, girls of
the most
ts and de-
y wounded
eapes, some
vers in the
n all sorts
and bride-
d mothers
And Nina
his special
us in the
ye seemed
f country.
raordinary,
Ken and
Peach.

Peach was hoisting the white flag of victory. PAGE 9

PAGE 9

Well, the room was got into order, the carpet swept, the bed newly made, the dimity curtains put up fresh to the windows; everything was as it ought to be when the day arrived on which Nina was to come back.

Early in the morning Peach got softly out of bed, and, running upstairs with bare feet, reached the top attic of the house. From there she climbed up a ladder, pushed open the trap-door, and a moment later the daring child was creeping along the roof. Fastened to one of the chimneys very securely by an iron band was a flagstaff which the Carlingford boys had hoisted a long time ago. It was not a flagstaff of the ordinary kind, but stood up erect and firm on its elevated perch; and now Peach was hoisting the flag, the white flag of victory, aloft; for was not Nina coming back that day?

She ran downstairs again, dressed herself hastily, and went into Fred's room, which adjoined hers. Fred was sound asleep; his dark curly lashes lay on his rosy cheeks. When Peach bounded upon the bed, shaking him all over, he roused himself with a growl.

'Now, what is it?' he said. 'I say, you fellows, I'm not going to stand it. I'll punch your heads if you do it again.'

'Oh Fred! Fred!' laughed Peach, 'you are such

a queer boy. I have been doing what I said I would. Won't Kenneth and Malcolm be in a rage?'

Fred opened his eyes lazily.

'Why, you are up and dressed,' he said. 'What's the matter?'

'Why, Nina is the matter,' said Peach. 'She's coming to-day, don't you know?'

'Oh, bother!' answered Fred. The next moment he was effectually roused by a smart slap on his cheek. This had come from Peach's very firm hand.

'What is the matter?' he said, half rising on his pillow.

'You are copying Malcolm and Ken,' she exclaimed. 'You didn't say "bother" last night; you heard them say it, and you're a mean thing, and I hate you, and I'm not going to play with you to-day. It's Nina that's coming back—Nina, the most wonderful girl in all the world—and I'm not going to stand it if you turn tail. Turn tail you may; but you needn't expect me to stay with you.'

'Oh, I didn't for a single instant mean that,' said Fred, very much alarmed at this indignation on the part of his twin-sister.

'You did mean it. I see the lie in your eyes,'

answered Peach. 'I am not going to say another word to you.'

She left the room, slamming the door after her. Fred uttered a deep sigh, and looked gloomily across his tiny chamber.

'What tiresome things girls are!' he said to himself. 'I'll have to make it up with Peach. I cannot live without her, somehow. She's my twin; I suppose that's it. But I really will be glad when I get away to school. Why, Ken said yesterday I was a little muff. I hate being a muff. I suppose when Nina comes I'll be more of a muff than ever. But I know what I'll do. I needn't make it up with Peach at all. I'll go across and have a chat with Amy. Amy Frere is a right-down nice sort of girl, and she never calls me a muff, and I'll go along and complain of Peach—that I will.'

No sooner had this thought come to Fred than he rose softly. He could be quite sly when he liked. He was absolutely afraid of Peach, who was much the more masterful of the twins, and he did not want her to pounce upon him again. He knew perfectly well that Kenneth and Malcolm would not take the smallest notice if he went to them blubbering, as he called it. The only thing was to secure the friendship of Amy, who was very nice and very

pretty—much prettier than Peach, who, in Fred's opinion, was a very so-so sort of girl, although she was his twin.

He dressed himself hastily, looked at the clock—it wanted ten minutes to seven—and rushed out of the house. He slid down the banisters and reached the ground-floor. He snatched up his cap, and, letting himself out, rushed across Priory Square. He soon reached the Freres' house. It was in some ways a more imposing house than the Carlingfords', and the brass plate on the door which bore Dr Frere's name had always a subduing effect on Fred. He managed, however, to lift the great, ponderous knocker, and gave it the sort of half-tremulous sound which is the result when the person who knocks has to stand on tiptoe. Presently a maid-servant opened the door.

'Why, Master Fred, what are you doing?' she said. 'It's barely seven o'clock!'

'I want to see Amy. Is she up?'

'I don't know.'

'May I run up and see, please, Jane?'

'I suppose you may, Master Fred.'

'Jane,' said Fred, looking at her reflectively, 'did you ever have a quarrel with your twin?'

'Lor', Master Fred, I ain't got a twin,' said Jane. 'Whatever is wrong, sir?'

'It's me,' said Fred. 'I'm wrong. I have had a quarrel with my twin; she spoke to me as she ought not to speak to a gentleman, and I am going to see Amy. Amy and I are one age. I am going up to her.'

'To be sure. You run along, dear,' said Jane, who could not help sympathising with Fred, more particularly when he raised eyes like sloes, and soft as velvet, to her face.

'Do you know that Nina is coming back to-day?' he said, much soothed by the maid-servant's sympathy.

'That's your sister, Master Fred?'

'Yes, yes,' said Fred. 'She's a big girl. It will be an awful trial to me, and to Ken, and to Malcolm; but don't you ever let it out, Jane. Keep it as secret as secret. Now I am going to Amy.'

Jane told him to run along, and he scampered up the stairs. Luckily for him Amy was up. She was in the schoolroom preparing her last lessons of the term. School was breaking up that day.

Rosaleen was a rather wild little girl. Amy was the proper one of the family. Amy was always smooth and neat and attentive. She had little or no originality about her; but she got on quickly with her books. Her teachers adored her, for

she did them such credit. She always gained prizes or certificates of merit, or some marks of approval; and she was so neat and so methodical in all her ways that nurse, who had very little to do now for any of the children, said that Amy was the comfort of her life.

Well, Amy was in the schoolroom, taking a last look over her carefully prepared lessons, when Fred burst into the room.

'Here I am,' said Fred. 'What are you doing, Amy?'

'Oh, preparing my lessons,' said Amy. She just glanced at him, then lowered her eyes again to con her long row of spelling.

'How do you spell "thermograph," Fred?' she asked, raising her blue eyes for a moment to the little boy's face.

'Oh, bother!' said Fred. 'I'm sure I wouldn't have come to see you if I thought you were going to ask me those sort of questions. I say, I'm in a mess. I'm quite worried. I'm in a sort of trouble. Won't you listen, Amy?'

'Yes, in a minute; but I must just know exactly how to spell "thermograph." Do you know what it means, Fred?'

'That I don't,' said Fred; 'never heard the word before. I don't think it is a proper English word.

It's gibberish; that's what it is. Ha! ha! I've caught you.'

'It's not gibberish,' replied Amy, her eyes flashing. 'It's an instrument for automatically recording variations of temperature. There now. Who'll say again that I don't know things? Thermograph, indeed, a gibberish word!'

Fred stared solemnly at her.

'How long are you going on?' he said. 'If you mean to say much more of that I'm off.'

'No; I'll talk to you in a minute,' answered Amy, who secretly was much flattered by Fred's arrival on the scene. She had a great admiration for Fred, and often said that he had '*beaux yeux*.' Amy was fond of airing her French. She glanced again over her spelling, nodded her wise little head, shook out her shining curls, and, closing the book, said:

'Well, if you're to give me a confidence, I'm willing to listen.'

'Oh, do talk simple,' said Fred. 'I hate those long words. Can't you talk as if you were a child; or were you born grown-up?'

'I 'spect so,' said Amy. 'They all say I'm wonderful for my age.'

'Thank goodness there are not many wonderful people. I declare I almost think I'd rather be snubbed by Peach.'

'But what is it, Fred? Why have you come bursting into the house at this hour? What's the matter?'

'We have quarrelled,' said Fred. 'Peach and I have had a quarrel. Peach spoke to me as no boy would submit to be spoken to this morning, and I could not stand it; and I thought I would come over to you, for you and I are the same age, and we might have been twins, just as likely as not.'

'We couldn't have been twins,' said Amy; 'we haven't got the same father and mother. Don't talk nonsense.'

'Well, let's suppose we are twins,' said Fred. He came up to Amy and looked with his sweet eyes into her face. She quite coloured, and, squeezing his hand, said:

'Oh, well, you're a nice little boy; I mean you've got beautiful eyes. What is it you want me to do?'

'To pretend we are twins—a real brother and sister, and to be awfully loving, and to keep Peach in the cold.'

'It would be fun,' said Amy, her eyes sparkling. 'Rosaleen and Peach might be chums. I'm a bit tired of Rosaleen; she's too wild for me. If you're to be my twin you must do just what I

wish. I'll have a lot to teach you. You must learn how to spell therm'——

'No, no,' replied Fred; 'that's not in the bargain. I won't learn spelling; but I can do lots of things for you. I could buy you sweets on the sly.'

'Oh, of course,' said Amy, considering. 'I did not think that you could be so useful; and you're never afraid of nothing?'

'I afraid?' said Fred. 'I'm a boy. Boys aren't frightened of things. I'll do lots of things for you, Amy. Let's be twins—shall we?'

'Let's,' answered Amy.

'Well, sit down and talk, and let's be comfy.'

They seated themselves on a cosy bench near the open window. Fred heaved a great sigh.

'Look across at our house,' he said suddenly.

Amy looked.

'I don't see anything particular,' she replied.

'Look high up.'

'Oh, you've got that stupid flag on that queer flagstaff. What for?' asked Amy.

'What for? It's on account of Nina; she's coming back.'

'As if I didn't know that. But what is the use of putting that stupid flag up? I do think you Carlingfords are silly.'

'No, we are not, and you shan't dare say it,' replied Fred. 'We're just as wise as you Freres; so you had better hold your tongue.'

'Oh, I didn't mean anything,' answered Amy, who did not want to quarrel.

'Let's sit close up together,' she said; 'it's rather nice having a twin. Rosaleen is no comfort to me; she's too wild, and she won't do her lessons. She is a care upon my mind. You'll do your lessons very nicely in future—won't you, Fred? It's nice getting prizes, and having people say, "That's the clever little Frere," as you walk down the street. Wouldn't you like to be called the clever little Carlingford?'

'As to that,' replied Fred, 'I never could be clever, but I could do a lot for you. I could fetch you things, and get you no end of fun. I'll get into scrapes; I'll be a sort of—a sort of'——

'Oh, I know,' said Amy, clapping her hands; 'you'll be a sort of knight to me.'

'Yes, yes; that's it. Like they have in the fairy tales. Well, I must be going back now, or Peach will find out; but I mean to tell her after breakfast. She and Rosaleen can be twins if they wish, and you and I will be twins; it will be very confusing and very interesting.'

'Very confusing indeed; but I'll like it all the

same,' said Amy. 'When did you say Nina was coming back?'

'Oh, some time this evening. There'll be no end of a fuss. You can fancy the state Kenneth and Malcolm and I will be in. Don't you think girls are awful rot, Amy?'

'Do I think girls are awful rot? Go away, Fred, go away; you're too rude for anything. Why, I'm a girl myself.'

'Oh, I don't mean you,' said Fred, who began to fear he was putting his foot in it all round; 'and there's nothing I wouldn't do for you; but other girls I mean, same as Rosaleen and Nina and Peach. All the girls I know except you are awful rot, and you're just an angel.'

'Well, I don't mind that way of putting it,' said Amy. 'Only go now, Fred, or Peach will find out, and she will be angry.'

CHAPTER II.

THE CARLINGFORDS AT HOME.

LATE that evening Nina arrived. She drove up in a cab all alone from the station, spoke to the man about her luggage, paid him, and came into the house in her usual independent, off-hand style. Nobody had ever subdued Nina since her birth; and she looked more independent than ever now.

Peach was watching her from over the banisters, and Fred — whose heart was beating wildly with excitement, for in reality he had always adored Nina, and was very sorry now for his terrible fit of temper in the morning—was stopping up his ears in his bedroom. He must yield; he knew it. He must rush to Nina, and allow her to hug him, and hug her back, and kiss her all over her warm face, and feel in his heart of hearts that there was no one like her in the world.

But meanwhile Peach, with a little yell of ecstasy, had rushed downstairs. Nina had said, 'How do you do, Peach?' and then, letting go her bag, had clasped the child in her arms, and had said, 'Oh, you little darling! And where is Fred? and where are the boys? Where is Ken? I want to see Ken this minute. Is Malcolm as obstreperous as ever? And oh! where's the mother—where's the mother?'

So all the family a moment later, including Fred, assembled in the hall; and no one, to look at the Carlingfords then, could ever think that the boys had been rude enough to say it was a bother that Nina had come back.

Nina was talking just as fast as ever she could, and there was a high colour in her cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling. She was very much excited, and very happy; and now and then she would stop in a whole volley of words to rush up to her mother and kiss her tempestuously over again, or to clasp her arms round Ken's neck, or to fly at Peach and almost strangle her in a fresh embrace; and Fred, who kept a little in the background, and thought of Amy and his conversation with her that morning, felt that he could hold out no longer, and, flying to his sister, said:

'Nina, have you forgotten me? I'm Fred. I'm

the other twin, you know. Have you forgotten me?'

'You darling! you treasure! you sweet!' said Nina; 'forgotten you? Never—never!' And then she absolutely lifted Fred off the ground—for he was rather small for his age, and she was tall and big and bonny—and hugged him to his heart's content.

A very happy family party certainly assembled in that wide hall in the Carlingfords' house; and presently Nina, with Kenneth, Malcolm, Peach, and Fred accompanying her, went up in a sort of royal procession to her bedroom.

'Are you tired, Nina darling?' said Peach. 'Were you very sick when you were crossing the Channel, and are you very, very happy to come home?'

'You haven't asked yet about the rabbits and the guinea-pigs,' said Fred.

'Oh! and, Nina, I say, old girl,' exclaimed Kenneth, 'I was made a prefect this term. It's an awful responsibility. No end of the fellows look up to me; but I have a right good time. It's awfully jolly being prefect.'

'And I had a move,' said Malcolm; 'and I think it likely I'll get that scholarship if I work hard enough. It is jolly at school, Nina. I had a fight last week with a fellow, and'——

'Oh, don't go on!' exclaimed Peach. 'Nina does not want to hear about your stupid old fights.'

'Shut up yourself,' cried Malcolm. 'You're just as bad as all other girls. You have no go in you. Girls are a poor lot—that they are.'

'A poor lot, indeed!' exclaimed Nina. 'You had better say that again when I am in the house. Now then, out you all go—all of you except Peach. I don't want boys in my bedroom. Be off with you now. I'm going to shut the door.'

Accordingly the three boys were left on the landing, where they laughed and shouted and called to Nina to be quick and come out again.

'After all, it is jolly to have her at home,' said Kenneth. 'She's an awfully spiffin' sort of girl.'

'I'm as proud as punch of her,' said Fred; and he thought again with fresh compunction of his conduct with Amy in the morning.

Meanwhile Nina was standing by the window and chatting to Peach.

'How are all the Freres?' she asked. 'Are the Evens all right?'

'Oh yes; we have great fun with them, although sometimes we quarrel. Amy was very unpleasant to-day. Do you know what she did?'

'Amy, the little one? I don't know anything

about her. How are Prue and Patty and little Rosaleen? I always rather took to Rosaleen.'

'But Rose has got so awfully wild, do you know, Nina; she ran away last week; she ran out of the house after breakfast, and never came back until quite late. She said she wanted to be a gipsy; and they were looking all over Warrencliffe for her. Wasn't it awful of her?'

Nina's gray eyes became full of laughter.

'Little darling!' she said. 'I always did like the Dark Rosaleen. It is nice to be back again; and I am so glad to see you, Peach. You're very small for your age; and you're not nearly so pretty as Fred.'

'Oh, I can't help my looks,' said Peach, an annoyed flush creeping over her little sallow face. 'I didn't make myself. I think it is rather unkind of you.'

'Unkind?' cried Nina. 'But I am always frank. You are not a beauty, and you had better know it at once. You'll have to go in for something else, you know.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, you'll have to pose as the clever one, or the brusque one, or the independent one. You cannot pose as the pretty one; that is quite impossible. Why, come to the glass and look at yourself. Here,

we 'll put our two faces together; let us look now.'

Peach felt herself trembling. No one in all the family adored Nina as she adored her. She had dreamt of her at night, and had thought of her by day, her only sister, her grown-up sister; Nina, whom she had not seen for two years; Nina, whom she meant to copy; Nina, who was to her glorious as a young rising sun. She had always obeyed Nina from the time she was an infant, and she stood now gazing at her little reflection in the mirror. She saw a face, very thin, with pale cheeks; the eyes big and nondescript in colour, the mouth wide, the nose the reverse of classical; thick, very dark hair tumbled back from the low forehead, and the gray eyes had a pleading and pathetic look in them. They gazed now full at the radiant vision of Nina, who had pressed her face close to that of little Peach.

Nina was very big for her age—the sort of girl whom people designate as beautiful. She had a radiant colour in her cheeks, and a dewy look in her big blue eyes; her lips were coral-red, her little nose was straight, and her hair of a golden brown, and very full of curls and fluffy tendrils; no scissors had ever cut it; the fringe which tumbled over her forehead was of Nature's own

making. She was a charming-looking girl, and had a curiously defiant and yet an affectionate air. She was big and well-rounded, and much developed for her years; and, altogether, was a perfect contrast to little sallow Peach.

'Well, well,' she said, 'who is to pose as beauty—you or I?'

'You—you, Nina darling. Oh, I love you so; you're so perfectly lovely!' said Peach.

'And you are just the best little brick in all the world,' answered Nina; 'and who knows but you may grow up a beauty? But never mind; at the present moment pose as'——

'What?' said Peach, nestling up close to her.

'My little shadow, for one thing. You'll do just what I tell you?'

'Just—just,' said Peach, giving a sigh of rapture. 'I don't mind a bit being plain. I rather like being plain, because it shows you off, you know.'

'Oh, you little sweet, you little dear!' cried Nina.

'And what am I to do for you?'

'Just what I tell you. You will—won't you?'

'Of course; of course. Nina, I would like to tell you something about Fred.'

'What! Fred; that little beauty? He is pretty, if you like, Peach.'

The colour now flew into Peach's cheeks, and a sense of desolation visited her heart.

'Oh! you don't know him,' she said. 'This morning he said that girls were bothers; and he was sorry that I put up the white flag of victory because you were coming back; he was really, truly, and'——

'Oh! don't say any more,' said Nina; 'you mustn't be a tell-tale-tit; that will never do.'

Peach coloured more than ever.

'And are you just as wild as you used to be, Nina?'

'Just as wild as ever? Rather!' answered Nina. 'I mean to kick up no end of a shindy here. You'll see what gay holidays we'll have. But come; I must wash my face and hands and brush out my hair, and then we must go down to supper. I suppose there is something for me to eat. I'm pretty peckish, I can tell you.'

'Then you didn't learn grand, grand ways at that school?'

'Grand ways? Rather not; but I can talk French like a native, and I can play—oh! you'll dance when I play. And I can sing—not much yet, for my master says I must not try my voice; but I can lead off, and we'll have a heap of choruses; and mother will sing the solos. Oh, we'll have a gay time!'

'And what about your drawings?' asked Peach.

'I can draw too. Oh! this funny old room. Do you remember when I did that cow over there? No, of course you were too young. That cow nearly horned me, and I took my revenge by drawing her portrait. Do you see she is just about to duck her head? But whenever she came too near I opened my parasol in her face, and she danced back again in terror; and while she was making up her mind to have another try at me, I did a little more of my sketch; and when she came too close, up went the parasol. Yes, Mrs Cow, I got the victory over you; and I mean to get the victory over every one, little Peach. I'm going to be victorious all the way. Now then, come along downstairs.'

'Surely there never was such a fascinating girl as Nina,' thought Peach as they ran downstairs and found themselves in the spacious dining-room; and there, waiting for them, their cheeks glowing with excitement, their eyes sparkling, were the twin Frere girls, Prue and Patty.

'There you are, Nina,' said Patty. 'Oh! it is nice to see you again.'

'Yes, I'm back,' said Nina. 'How are you, Patty? Don't strangle me. You haven't grown as much as I expected. Are you doing lessons in the old-fashioned way or the new way? How are you,

Prue? Are you going to be a new woman or one of the old domestic sort?'

'Oh! I am sure I never thought,' answered Prue. 'What queer questions you ask, Nina!'

'Yes, I was always queer,' replied Nina carelessly. 'Mother darling, I am so hungry. May I sit close to you, and will you pour out my tea first? Forgive me if I am rude, Prue and Patty; but I am only just home, you know.'

'It is nice to see you again,' said Patty. 'What a great big girl you are!'

'Yes; and so fat,' said Prue.

'Personal remarks are rude,' replied Nina. 'Now then, I am quite ready to begin.'

The meal proceeded; the boys joined. The mother laughed happily; she listened to Nina, who led the conversation. Soon all the other young folks were silent, looking at Nina. She told capital stories; she clapped her hands; she led the chorus of applause. The meal was only half over when she suddenly sprang to her feet.

'Oh! I can't sit still; it's exciting being home again. Come all of you into the drawing-room, and let's have a right good song. I want to sing a lot of the "Geisha" songs, and the "Runaway Girl," and others. Now then, mother dear, I'll play; will you sing, and we'll all join in the chorus?'

Nina rushed to the piano, flung it open, and began to rattle off a brilliant accompaniment. Her little fingers were slim and small; her hands were white as snow. Patty looked at her, her brown eyes growing big with admiration.

Peach felt that her sister was getting more and more fascinating each moment.

'When are Rosaleen and Amy coming in?' whispered Peach to Patty.

Patty gave her a warning glance.

'Rosaleen and Amy are both in punishment; they have been sent to bed early,' she whispered. 'I will tell you why afterwards. It is partly on account of your Fred. Your Fred has been awfully naughty.'

'My Fred naughty! You shan't scold my twin,' said Peach.

'He is not your twin any more; he's Amy's twin.'

'What ridiculous nonsense you talk!' cried Peach, stammering with indignation.

'Come, come, girls; no quarrelling on the night I come back,' called out Nina over her shoulder. 'Now then, mother, come here. We'll have "Oh! listen to the Band."'

She played the first chords of the pretty music, the children joined in, and very merry were the

sounds; and people who passed the windows stood still to listen.

'What is that noise?' said one to another.

'Only the Freres and Carlingfords going on as usual,' said one boy to his companion. 'They are a jolly lot. I wonder why they're such splendid friends?'

In the midst of all the fuss and merriment, Fred crept unobserved out of the drawing-room. He had overheard Patty's words to Peach, and was much concerned about Amy. Fred was a very loyal little boy at heart, although he had been tempted to forsake his sister Peach in the morning; but having made a compact with Amy, he did not think it right to desert her. Why had she got into trouble? What was the matter?'

Slipping his hat on his head, he went to the hall door, opened it gingerly, and stepped out. It was night already in the square; no one observed him as he flew across to the Freres' house. There was not the least bit of use going in by the front door; he would be seen. If Amy were in punishment he would not be allowed to have anything to do with her; but he knew another entrance. He had tried it before; so had Peach; so also had Dark Rosaleen when she had gone out on naughtiness intent.

At one side of the doctor's house was a postern-door which led into the garden. This door was usually locked at night; but as early as nine o'clock, which was the present hour, it was on the latch. Fred softly lifted the latch, and found himself in the untidy premises which were known as the children's garden. The grown-up people's garden was in splendid order, and ran far away nearly two acres in extent at the back of the house; but just beyond the postern-gate was the children's untidy garden, and, looking into this garden, was the schoolroom, that apartment which was generally known as 'the den.' It was an untidy room, without any attempt at ornamentation. On the floor was nothing better than linoleum; on the walls were maps and bookcases and caricatures; and in every imaginable corner were baskets and cages for animals, for the Frere children had a craze in that direction, and sometimes 'the den' did not smell too sweet in consequence. Of course the Carlingford children loved 'the den,' and had never spent happier afternoons than when they were disporting themselves with the Freres in this very large and very shabby room.

Fred now sincerely hoped that he might slip into the house by one of its windows. He climbed up on the window-sill. Yes, fortune favoured him; the window was unhasped. He managed to lift the

heavy sash sufficiently high to creep in, and the next moment he was hurrying upstairs as fast as his small feet could carry him. What were the words Patty had said? Rosaleen and Amy were in bed! He knew where they slept. They slept in the little room just below the attics; a small room with two little beds in it, and very scanty furniture, and a view right over the town to the distant hills beyond.

Fred softly unfastened the door and looked in. Were they asleep? Had they sobbed themselves to sleep? When all was so exciting and happy in his home, were Rosaleen and Amy in the Land of Naughty Dreams? It was dreadful—dreadful to be in the Land of Naughty Dreams! He had sometimes been in that dismal country, and oh! what he had suffered! Naughty dreams came, as a rule, after you had been naughty; they came as retribution will come sure and certain. Wild beasts came, grim furies, all sorts of horrors; and the children could not run away from the horrors, and the horrors came closer and closer. Oh, it was fearful—fearful to be in the dismal Country of Naughty Dreams!

'I say, Amy,' whispered Fred above his breath. He stepped in and peered round. There was no answer. He looked at the two little beds. They were empty.

CHAPTER III.

THE NAUGHTY LITTLE SISTERS.

RED backed quietly out of the room, closed the door softly behind him, and stood on the landing in absolute amazement and fear. For quite a minute he did not know what to do. Nothing could be plainer than Patty's words: that her sisters, Rosaleen and Amy, were in punishment. They had been sent to bed. So far everything was as, somehow, he expected it to be; but this most unlooked-for *dénouement* puzzled the little fellow completely. Rosaleen and Amy were not in bed. Where, then, were they? Had they gone to bed for a certain time, and got up again? Was that the sort of punishment which had been meted out to them? He scarcely thought that likely, for Dr Frere, although the kindest man in the world — he had always doctored Fred when he was ill, so of course

Fred ought to know — was also stern when his anger was really aroused; and if the children did something to annoy him he generally insisted on a severe punishment being meted out; and nothing would induce Mrs Frere, kind and sweet and motherly as she was, to go against her husband's wishes in the matter. Therefore Fred was forced to draw the conclusion that the girls were in the act of some further naughtiness.

Now, of course, had Fred himself been a perfect boy, he would have gone straight home again and clung more affectionately than ever to his comparatively good little sister; but, sad as it is to relate, Fred was by no means a perfect boy, and his heart beat now with intense excitement, and he quickly made up his mind to discover for himself what the two little sisters were about.

Accordingly he slipped downstairs. He had been lucky coming up, and he was lucky again going down. No one saw him; no one was about. The two elder girls being at the Carlingfords', and the two younger being supposed to be fast asleep in their small beds, Mrs Frere had gone out for the evening with her husband, and the servants were far away in the kitchen, glad to have a quiet time all to themselves.

Fred entered 'the den.' The white kittens 'meawed'

as he crossed the floor; the birds stirred uneasily on their perches. Fred again opened the window and stepped into the garden. He drew the window softly down after him; he must leave no trace of his exit, in case any one wanted to follow him. The moon had now come up—not a full moon, but a half one; she gave sufficient light for the little boy to see white lines of brightness along the garden—the grown-up people's garden. It fell in patches on the tennis-lawn and on the fruit-trees. He followed that strip of moonlight as if he were fascinated. He felt his heart beating loudly; he himself was going on an adventure. He had not the slightest doubt that he would be severely punished for this; but the present feeling was delicious, and he would not have given up his quest for the two naughty little sisters for all the world.

Of course they were in the garden. They were very fond of the garden—especially Rosaleen. Rosaleen adored the garden. How often had she not stolen out at night, crept out by the pear-tree, run down on to the grass, and danced there until she was fit to drop with weariness, and then stole back by the same route to her bed! Yes, she had done this in spite of all Amy's warnings and Amy's proper ways; for no little sister would dare complain of the Dark Rosaleen, and the Dark

Rosaleen had a will nearly as strong as Nina's own.

Fred was puzzled about Amy; it was his duty to go and see his twin. Suppose she was in danger; he, being her true knight—surely he ought to go to her rescue.

In vain, however, he searched the entire garden. He peeped into the arbour, trembling as he did so. He even said in a low whisper, 'Amy—Rose—it's me; it's Fred;' but there was no answer. He was just beginning to tire of his search, when he suddenly saw standing out clearly in the moonlight a little strip of a white dress. The little strip of white was clinging on to one of the gooseberry-bushes, and this gooseberry-bush was at the extreme end of the garden, just where there was a stile leading into a field. Without the slightest hesitation, Fred, feeling much inclined to yell in his ecstasy, climbed the stile and entered the field. There was no further trace of the truants, but he ran down the path with confidence. At the bottom was a copse, and just at the entrance to the copse was a sort of little arbour which the Frere children had made for themselves a long, long time ago, and had deserted.

As Fred approached, now he distinctly heard the rustle of a dress, then the whispered sound of a

voice, and going a step farther he saw a light. Yes; there was a light shining through the trees in the copse, and the light seemed to come direct from the rustic arbour made by the children. The moment Fred's footsteps were heard the light was extinguished, but he knew that Rosaleen and Amy were close at hand. He ran quickly up.

'I know you're both there. I can't think what you're doing,' he cried out; 'but of course I'm not going to split on you, so light up.'

There came a gay, ringing, funny laugh, and then the thinner voice of Amy said:

'Why, surely this is Fred Carlingford?'

'Yes, it's me. I came to look for you. Oh! light up, and do tell me what you are doing.'

'Give me a match, Amy, and be quick,' said Rosaleen.

Amy took a match-box from the pocket of her dress, and struck one. Fred now saw what the little girls were about. They were evidently having a right good time. There was a tiny table on which a white newspaper was spread, and on the newspaper were some dolls' plates and some dolls' knives and forks; and there was a cake—a tiny cake cut up into several pieces; and there were two little tin mugs, both of them full of a queer sort of mixture which shone red in the light of the match; and in

the centre of the table was a very, very small paraffin lamp.

Rosaleen's dark eyes, big and black as Fred's own, now glanced full up at him.

'We were having supper,' she said. 'Do you want to join us?'

'Oh, may I?' answered Fred. 'How perfectly 'licious!'

'I don't like it at all,' said Amy. 'I feel downright wicked. But there! Rosaleen drags me whatever way she pleases.'

'Shut up! shut up!' said Rosaleen. 'Come along, Fred. We brought the paraffin lamp 'cos we knew that candles might blow out if there was any draught. Now then, you hold the chimney. It's rather hot; don't drop it. We turned it out when you came prying; but, as you have pried, you must stay. There's not much for supper, but what there is is great fun.'

As to Fred, his heart was beating wildly in his excitement. To comfort Amy, to bend over her pillow, to kiss her as she lay in her little punishment bed, had been captivating enough in prospective; but what was it to the joy of entering the arbour and partaking of the stolen supper with both little naughty sisters!

Accordingly he valiantly held the hot chimney,

although he had to control his feelings in doing so. The paraffin lamp was lit once more, and he was able to see the flushed and terrified face of Amy and the glowing, triumphant, victorious one of Rosaleen.

Of all the children in both houses there were none to compare with Rosaleen for beauty. Her eyes had such a gleam in them, such a look of intense fun; her lips had such full curves, and were of such a glowing crimson; her complexion was so rich, and her colour so vivid; and her quantities of jet-black hair curled and fuzzed all over her head. She was a radiant-looking child, with those black eyes, and those pearly-white teeth, and those glowing lips and cheeks; and she had never looked more radiant than now, more perfectly beautiful.

'Ah, Fred!' she said, 'so you are going to join us. Isn't it fun to have Amy here? She won't bother me with spelling for a good long bit after this night.'

'But how did you go and get naughty, Amy?' asked Fred.

'Don't bother about that now,' said Rose over her shoulder. 'She's naughty, and that's the main thing. It was my doing, of course. I always do get Amy to do just what I wish. Has your Nina come back?'

'Yes; and she is so jolly,' said Fred. 'Such a pity you were both naughty; you would have been over with the rest of us. We were singing "Oh, listen to the Band."'

'I don't care nothing for songs,' said Rosaleen. 'What could be more glorious fun than this? Have an inch of cake, Fred?' She cut an inch carefully from the small piece in the centre of the table, and handed it to Fred on the top of a spoon.

'There,' she said, 'the spoon is tin, but it's clean, and the little mugs are clean too. Would you like some of our raspberry-vinegar lemonade? It's a mixture we have made ourselves. I made it; it's not bad. Shall I tell you what it is made of?'

'Oh, I don't mind,' said Fred. 'It looks very good.'

'It's sweeties melted down,' cried Rose. 'We melted them on a little bit of fire before we came out, and then we mixed them ever so quickly with warm water, and they are really quite 'licious. Would you like to try it? Don't take too big a sip; there's not more than enough for Amy and me, but you can have a sip too. You don't mind, Amy, do you?'

'No, I don't mind,' said Amy. 'We'll get into frightful trouble for this. I shall never be the same child again—never.'

'But you 'll be a much, much nicer child,' said Dark Rosaleen. 'You 'll be worth something now—won't she, Fred?'

'Yes,' said Fred. 'But do tell me how you got here, and why you came.'

'Why we came!' cried Rosaleen. 'We came 'cos we couldn't possibly stay in bed. We went to bed, but we didn't undress. Amy wanted to, but I pulled her hair so hard she had to stop. I told her I knew perfectly well none of the servants would bother us. I heard one of them come creeping upstairs, but she went down again; and I heard her saying she wasn't going to worrit herself about us. So I made Amy come into the schoolroom, and we melted the sweeties and mixed the bottleful of raspberry-vinegar lemonade, and we kept the cakes we had at supper—it was dreadful having no more; and then we came here. We have been here for over an hour, and it 's 'licious—isn't it?'

'Well, I don't know,' answered Fred. 'I suppose so.'

'We had better go back now,' said Amy. 'Mother may come home any moment, and she may come up to see us.'

'She don't come up to see us scarcely ever,' said Rose. 'I say, Fred, are you really going to be on our side?'

'What do you mean?' asked Fred.

'Take another inch of cake and another sip of raspberry-vinegar lemonade.'

Fred ate his inch of cake with deliberation and sipped his lemonade solemnly.

'Don't take too big a gulp,' said Rose. 'Now then, listen.'

Fred returned the tin mug to Rose.

'Aren't you awfully happy, Fred?'

'Yes,' said Fred, 'awfully.'

'And you're not a bit afraid of being found out?'

Fred looked full into Rosaleen's glorious dark eyes, and said he was not afraid.

'But I am,' said poor Amy. 'I think it is awful. I wish—I do wish I had never come.'

'What a kill-joy spoil-sport you are!' said Rosaleen, looking with contempt at her younger sister. 'Well, anyhow, Fred is enjoying himself—aren't you, Fred?'

'Yes,' said Fred.

'Are you going to join on to us—to belong to us?'

'Oh, I don't know,' answered Fred.

'But you said you would join us this morning,' cried Amy, looking at him with some reproach.

'Well, of course,' replied Fred; 'and that's why

I have come over. I will confess something. I did kiss Nina when she came back to-night; I did hug her ever so hard; and Peach seems quite loving to me again.'

'I can't be your twin, you know, really,' said Amy; 'but I can be your special friend.'

'And so can I,' said Rose. 'It's tiresome having no boys about. I think we might as well be chummy. If we are chummy, you know what it means, Fred?'

'No, I don't,' said Fred.

'You have to go through the ceremony. Any one who is chummy with us has to go through the ceremony.'

'What ceremony?'

'You have to wait until the fairies come.'

'Oh, I don't want to see fairies,' said Fred.

Rosaleen gave a wild laugh.

'You're nothing of a boy!' she cried; 'you haven't got any spunk worth speaking of. We're going to stay here until twelve o'clock; then, when we hear the tinkle of the little bells as the fairies and the brownies come out, we're going to run to meet them, and you must lie down flat on the grassy sward, and the fairies will walk over you. If they do we'll know, for you'll have little drops of dew and flowers which they use for carriages on your

clothes, and after that you'll belong to us. Will you stay with us until twelve o'clock, and wait for the fairies?'

Now, Fred had not quite bargained for this; nevertheless, the witchery which Dark Rosaleen threw over her subjects was compelling him. Amy held out a cold and timid hand.

'You may as well wait now you have come,' she said; 'it will be a sort of comfort, when we are going through the most terrific punishment for this, to know that you will be going through the same.'

'Well, I'll stop, and bear the punishment, and be as plucky as you please,' said Fred; 'but I must make a condition.'

'What is that?' asked Rosaleen.

'It will have nothing whatever to do with you, Rose; it is for Amy.'

'Oh! I like that,' said Amy; 'and you do want to be my twin—don't you Fred?'

'Of course I do,' replied Fred. 'I would have been your twin if you had let me.'

'You never could be that. You hadn't the same father and mother. But what is the condition?'

'This,' said Fred, 'that you don't ask me to spell no words.'

'Very well,' replied Amy; 'but I had some good

ones — "laboratory" and "bacteriology," and a few others of the same sort.'

'Oh! don't begin,' said Fred; 'if you do I'll fly.'

'And if you do I'll pull your hair,' said Rosaleen; 'and you're to be chummy with me, remember, Fred, as well as with Amy. Now then, it's all settled, and we'll wait till twelve o'clock.'

'I wonder what's the hour now?' cried Fred.

'Oh, quite early,' said Rosaleen; 'it's not ten yet. We have two hours to wait.'

'Seems to me it's rather cold,' said Fred. He glanced at the two little sisters in white evening-frocks. They wore pinafores over them; but they had thin shoes on, and nothing at all to keep away the damp from the copse. Fred too had only come out in his little indoor suit. He shivered slightly.

'Let's walk about,' said Amy.

'Nothing of the kind,' replied Rose. 'Let's take another inch of cake each, and a sip of the raspberry-vinegar lemonade.'

The raspberry-vinegar lemonade was not a stimulating mixture, and it certainly did not add either to the spirits or the heat of the little party. Presently Fred spoke.

'I am going to run about,' he said. 'I'm all froze up.'

The little girl darted a few feet away, and presently was pirouetting wildly round. PAGE 47

etting
PAGE 47

'Oh! and I'll run too,' cried Amy. 'Do let me go with you, Fred.'

They linked their arms together and went out on the grass. It looked quite bright and cheerful in the centre of the field, and Fred was pleased to see that the moon would keep them company for at least another hour. Rosaleen flew after them.

'Let's dance,' she said; 'that will please the fairies. Do you know the real fairies' dance, Fred?'

'No,' answered Fred.

'Well, I'll teach you. Here! point your toes out; now give me your right hand; now hold my right hand so; now then, step out. Here, I'll do it first, all by myself.'

The little girl darted a few feet away, pointed her pretty toes, and presently was pirouetting wildly round. She danced gracefully; she twirled round. There was nothing, it seemed to Fred, that she could not do; and presently she danced up to the other two children and made a low bow.

'I am the Fairy Queen,' she said. 'Oh, I wish the rest of them were out! I would go with them, and you two should be my subjects. You're not cold now, are you?'

'Cold?' said Amy. 'I am shivering.'

'Well, dance about.'

But Amy could not dance as Rosaleen could, so Rosaleen caught Fred by the hand, instructed him once more in his steps, and then they were soon dancing merrily up and down the field. Fred, in his own way, was nearly as graceful as Rose; the quick movement warmed his blood.

Amy stood silent and miserable. She began to go slowly over her spelling—'laboratory,' 'bacteriology,' and 'thermograph.' It was much, much more exciting to pose as a wise little girl in the schoolroom than to follow Rosaleen in her mad adventures.

But the time flew by, and the moon rose high in the heavens; and Rose had just gravely announced that the fairies would soon be here, and that Fred had better lie down on the grass in a distant part of the field in order to be quite ready for the brownies and the fairies to trip over him, when a footstep was heard approaching, and the next instant Dr Frere, his face white with indignation, appeared on the scene.

CHAPTER IV.

VEAL PIES AND COLD SAUSAGES.

F course the naughty little sisters were severely punished. They were taken straight home into mother's presence, and mother was told of their very wicked, very disgraceful conduct; and then they were sent to bed, and told that their father and mother would have something to say to them on the following morning. After that Dr Frere had taken Fred's hand and walked with him across the square, and asked to see Mrs Carlingford, who was under the supposition that the little boy was in bed a long time ago. Mrs Carlingford and the Doctor had a long conversation all about Fred; and Fred stood by feeling very hot and very miserable. His throat was sore already, because he had taken a severe chill, and the tears were coming and going in his brown eyes.

The next day the two little Freres and Fred were in bed with very bad colds, and Dr Frere administered some medicine more bitter than usual. He told his wife that he had quite a pleasure in making the medicine particularly unpalatable; and the children, who were accustomed during their brief and few and far between illnesses to having great notice taken of them, and great pity bestowed upon them, on this occasion found that only the disagreeableness of being ill fell to their share; and Fred was just as severely treated as Rosaleen and Amy. Therefore, the midnight picnic in the copse remained long in the memory of the little boy as a most disagreeable matter to think about. But far wider consequences were to result from this act of naughtiness on the part of the Dark Rosaleen; for this was in reality the first beginning of the great quarrel.

A week passed; the days of punishment had come to an end, and the Freres and the Carlingfords met. The Freres at least were quite cheerful once more, and the Carlingfords thought that it was time for a real jollification.

In the Carlingfords' house was a very large underground room. It ran the whole width of the wide house, and was as cheerful and useful an apartment as any children could desire.

Owing to Nina's persuasions, Mrs Carlingford

agreed that a tea should be given in the children's parlour, as it was called, and each of the Freres was to be invited.

'You must let me manage the entertainment, mother,' said Nina.

'Of course, darling,' replied her mother. 'I shall be only too pleased.'

'Well, I want all sorts of out-of-the-way things. I don't want quite an ordinary tea. I want cold sausages and veal pies.'

'My dear Nina, could anything be more unwholesome?'

'And tomato salad,' continued Nina in the calmest voice; 'tomato salad with chopped onions in one corner. We used sometimes to have those kind of dishes at the school in Brussels—sometimes, not often; and I want to have that tea to-morrow night. It is a very important occasion—very important indeed.'

'Very well, dear,' said her mother; 'only you really must be careful not to eat too much of the cold veal pie; it is not good for any of you at this hour, and I doubt if Dr Frere'——

'Mother,' said Nina, 'when we go over to the Freres' to tea and enjoy a hearty meal in that "den" of theirs, we always take what is put before us without any complaint; and when the Freres come

to us to-morrow night they must either eat the veal pies and the cold sausages and the tomato salad, or they must do without. We will have fruit salad, too, if you like, mother—that, at least, you cannot say is unwholesome.'

So Mrs Carlingford, who was always more or less under the influence of strong-willed Nina, agreed to give the children the sort of tea they desired; and Nina herself, with Peach trotting like a small dog at her side, went down and made all necessary arrangements.

'This is going to be a very great occasion, and a very important one,' she said, turning once to Peach.

'Yes,' answered Peach. 'Why?'

'A great deal hangs on it,' said Nina.

'More than just an everyday tea? We have teas every week of our lives with the Freres,' said Peach.

'I dare say,' replied Nina; 'but we have not had this sort of tea with the Freres before. Now, where is Kenneth, and where is Malcolm? I want to speak to them both.'

'I will run and fetch them,' said Peach.

She ran out of the room. The boys' own private 'den' was at the top of the house—a great big attic, nearly as big as the basement-room where the tea was to take place. The boys were busy as usual

over some scientific experiments. They said 'Bother!' when Peach put in her sallow little face and said that Nina wanted them.

'I'm not going,' said Kenneth. 'Tell Nina she has got to wait.'

'I'll have done presently, in about half-an-hour. Now, you make yourself scarce, Peach-blossom,' said Malcolm in a kinder tone.

But instead of going away Peach advanced into the room.

'What are you doing? Can't you go? Be off!' said Kenneth.

Still Peach held her ground.

'You had better go, Peach,' said her younger brother.

'I'm waiting; we'll all three go together,' said Peach.

Kenneth raised his dark brows.

'What's the matter?' he asked.

'You know,' replied Peach—'you know perfectly well that you'll come, 'cos Nina has asked you to come. You never say "bother" to her face. I think you're a bit of a coward. Nina leads you any way she likes. Why do you say things behind her back that you wouldn't say to her face?'

Kenneth coloured.

'Upon my word,' he said, 'what is the world

coming to? All right, young un. Of course I'm very fond of Nina; she's a jolly girl, and no mistake. I'll come down and hear what she has got to say; but we are both very busy making experiments, and can't be bothered by girls all the time, you know.'

'You say that to Nina when you see her,' said Peach, who had plucked up great spirit during the past week. And then the three ran downstairs.

Nina had now arranged the tea-table to her satisfaction. It looked very pretty. She liked to do things nicely. Of course there were flowers on the table, and a great dish of oranges at one end, and an enormous group of bananas at the other; and the tea equipage was at one side, with cups and saucers of the harlequin pattern, which always delighted the children; and then the centre of the board was flanked by the cold sausages and the veal pies and the tomato salad; and there were a few cakes, and some plates of brown-and-white bread and butter.

'It's a very good supper indeed,' said Nina; 'it is the kind of supper that strong people would like to eat. I do not intend any of my followers to have milk-and-water diet in the future. Oh, here you are, boys! Shut the door, please, Malcolm.'

'What do you want?' said Kenneth. 'We are dreadfully busy.'

'We're experimenting,' said Malcolm, 'and we have nearly got a vacuum. Don't keep us, please, Nina.'

'I won't keep you when I have said what I want to say.'

'Well, what is it?' asked Kenneth.

Nina walked towards the fire. She turned now and faced her brothers.

'We have asked the Freres—or rather the Evens, as I prefer to call them—to come over to-night, because we have something solemn to say. Fred has been undergoing punishment for the last week.'

'And richly he deserved it,' said Kenneth.

Nina stamped her foot.

'He did not deserve it. It is that cheeky, rebellious, little Dark Rosaleen that deserves it, and I am going to have an explanation; and I want you boys to promise me that when the time comes you will back me up. Rosaleen has got to eat humble-pie for leading poor little Amy and Fred into mischief.'

'I can't see it,' said Kenneth. 'Peach told me the whole story. Fred joined their picnic of his own accord. I cannot see that Rosaleen is specially to blame.'

'All right; you leave it to me. Rosaleen wants to be mistress in our two families, and I do not

intend to allow it. That is all, boys. I expect you to back me up. If you don't—well, you'll be sorry you didn't, that's all.'

Kenneth and Malcolm looked at their sister in some wonder; but presently they thought prudence the better part of valour, and went back in silence to their experiments in the attic.

'Oh, what is it, Nina?' said Peach, running up to her sister.

'Nothing for the present,' said Nina. 'I did not think it necessary to consult you about it, Peach. You naturally will do just what I tell you; but the Dark Rosaleen has got to eat humble-pie. It is absolutely necessary for the good of the two families. I have thought it all out, and I know exactly what I am doing.'

Peach felt her heart beating with great excitement. This was really most entertaining. She had been jealous now and then of Dark Rosaleen. Why should that spirited and very handsome little girl have everything her own way? During the other holidays when Nina was away at school, Rosaleen, young as she was, had conducted the games, had ordered the pursuits of the hour, had taken the lead.

'Run upstairs and make yourself as smart as you can,' said Nina. 'They will be here in a quarter of an hour. Of course we will do nothing until after

tea. I would not be rude for the world. You must leave the thing to me; a great deal hangs on it—a great deal more than you think.'

Peach ran out of the room. On the stairs she met Fred.

'What's up now?' said Fred.

'Oh, what a girl Nina is!' said Peach. 'She is the most splendid, staunch, grand creature that ever walked the earth.'

'What do you mean?' said Fred.

'I won't tell you,' answered Peach. 'Only, make yourself look as nice as you can, Fred. We are going to have a time to-night. Oh, darling Nina, brave Nina! You love her—don't you, Fred?'

'Of course,' said Fred; 'but I love Rosaleen and Amy too.'

'Don't bother me about those Frere children,' replied Peach, almost in a tone of passion. 'You will be surprised at some things that will happen to-night, Fred. You had better keep your ears open; and it's on account of you, and you talk like that! Oh, I could slap you! How dare you talk like that?'

'I think I had better keep away from you just at present,' said Fred. 'You're talking sort of riddles, and you look very fierce and cross. I don't know that things have improved since Nina came back.

But, oh dear! I don't want you to slap me. *Pax! Pax!*'

He held out his hand, which, according to the code of honour with the Carlingfords, Peach was obliged to accept, even against her will.

She ran upstairs and dressed herself as neatly as she could. Nina followed her more slowly. Nina went past Peach's tiny room, which adjoined Fred's, and went on to her own very curious apartment. She looked attentively at her face in the glass.

'It's too ridiculous,' she said to herself, 'that a child of eleven and I should be rivals, and yet such is the case. The Dark Rosaleen has got character—great character. I am quite willing to lead her, I am quite willing to help her, I am quite willing to mould her; but she must submit to me; she must once for all feel that there is one person who is completely and absolutely her mistress.'

So Nina fluffed out her pretty hair, put on the dress she knew she looked best in (a soft pale blue), and looked at the lovely roses in her cheeks and at the light in her eyes, and then went gently downstairs just as if she were the meekest, instead of the most spirited, girl in all the world.

The guests had now arrived; and, as this occasion was evidently one of great importance, they had also dressed with care. Prue and Patty were in white,

and looked as sweet and dainty as two very pretty little girls could look. The Dark Rosaleen was in crimson—her favourite colour—and Amy was in pale blue. Amy looked subdued, and more inclined to offer competitions in the spelling line than ever; and Fred, who seemed to read this thought in her eyes, backed away from her on the spot.

'No, no,' he said to himself, 'I'll not be disgraced on account of my spelling. Amy is very nice, and a sort of a half-twin of mine; but I'll not have her showing me up before the others.'

Amy was very gracious and placid. She had forgotten her wild orgy in the copse, and had resumed her former character of exemplary goodness. She went over to Peach and began to tell her about her school work.

'I am preparing for our next term,' she said. 'I am certain to get a remove. I shall be in a class with girls quite two years older than myself, and I mean to show them that I am quite their equal. I mean to get a prize in that class. I am only taking English and geology. Do you know anything about geology, Peach?'

'I never heard of it before,' answered Peach.

'Oh Peach, and you are ten years old! I am surprised; you're same age as me. How is it you're so backward?'

'I like being backward,' said Peach, who felt terribly aggravated by Amy's superior manner.

'Now then,' called out the gay, cheerful voice of Nina, 'as we are all assembled, we may as well enjoy our tea. I will pour out, of course. Dark Rosaleen, come and sit near me.'

'Why should I?' said Rosaleen. 'I would much rather sit next to Fred.'

'Oh, just as you please,' answered Nina in a would-be indifferent tone. 'Fred, come over and sit near Dark Rosaleen. Now then, let us all begin.'

Kenneth, from the other end of the table, stood up and said grace, and then the children began to attack the viands. They were all hungry, and the veal pies, the cold sausages, and even the tomato salad found great acceptance in their eyes. What naughty dreams they might have afterwards remained to be proved; but for the time being they thoroughly appreciated Nina's rather peculiar diet. Then the cakes were consumed, and the oranges and the bananas; and then Nina went to the bell and rang it, and the servant came in and removed the tea-things, and nothing was left of the feast except the table on which it had been laid, which was a very long one, and covered from end to end with green baize.

'Now what shall we do?' said Dark Rosaleen.

Her splendid eyes were gleaming, and she showed a glint of her white teeth, and looked handsomer than almost any little girl ever looked before. Her hair stood in a thick mass round her glowing face. She jumped up and said:

'Let me choose the games, please, Nina.'

CHAPTER V.

A DECLARATION OF WAR.

NINA looked very attentively at Rosaleen. They made a perfect contrast as they stood facing each other. Nina was big and soft and fair; Rosaleen was dark and *spirituelle*.

'Let me choose the games,' repeated the little girl. Then she added, laying her hand for a moment on Nina's, 'I always do, you know.'

'Yes, I know,' answered Nina. She spoke in her calmest tones; she was considering.

Peach, who knew something of what was coming, and Ken and Malcolm, who were also uncomfortable with premonitions which they could not exactly define, watched their elder sister intently.

Fred sidled up to Dark Rosaleen and slipped his hand through her arm. When he did this Amy gave him a glance of withering contempt. Was

that the way her half-twin was treating her? She thought once more of her spelling, of her good conduct, of her exemplary life. She must give Fred up. Pretty as he was, he was not at all the sort of little boy who ought to associate with a girl of her calibre.

'May I choose the games?' asked Rosaleen a third time. 'Oh! do be quick, Nina; you're very big, but you're very slow, and time is passing. We want our games so badly.'

'You are my guest, of course,' said Nina. 'What games would you like to have? Yes, it seems fair enough that you should choose at least the first, and I will choose the second. The Evens choose the first, and the Odds choose the second; that's fair enough. What do you choose, Rosaleen?'

'Blind-man's Buff,' replied Rosaleen, without a moment's hesitation—'Blind-man's Buff, and the run of the entire house.'

Now, Blind-man's Buff without the run of the entire house is a very insipid game; and the Carlingfords and the Freres, on every occasion when they met together, had the run of the house for this amusement.

'Very well,' said Nina; 'we can have it. We will have Blind-man's Buff for exactly a quarter of an hour.' She took out her little watch and laid it on

the mantelpiece as she spoke. 'You had better start as fast as you can, Rosaleen; arrange the game, and let us begin.'

Rosaleen gave a wild sort of whoop, and immediately began to choose her party.

In two minutes' time the entire house of Carlingford was in wild confusion. Children were racing up and down stairs; children were shouting and even yelling to each other. Even Nina forgot her resolve, and all that was to come of it, as she followed in Rosaleen's spirited wake. But, sharp to the moment when the quarter of an hour was up, she called her little party down to the children's parlour.

'Now it is my turn,' she said. 'Let us have "Consequences."'

'Consequences' is a very interesting game when played by grown-up people; but these children had never heard of it before. They grumbled a little as Nina supplied them with slips of paper and pencils. She did not listen, however, to a word of discontent, but led the game, and put plenty of spirit into it.

Rosaleen began to frown and knit her brows.

'I don't like that game,' she said. 'I want something lively—stirring about. I hate games where you have to sit at the table and never move.'

'You happen to be my guest; and I gave you the

choice on the first occasion,' answered Nina. 'I enjoyed your game; you ought to enjoy mine. That is but fair.'

'Oh yes, surely that is but fair,' said Prue, raising her pretty little round face, and looking with affection at Nina.

'But we have had enough of "Consequences,"' cried Nina, suddenly springing to her feet, and letting her pencil and paper fall to the floor. 'I want to say something, very special. It is about Rosaleen. Come here, Rosaleen; stand near me. The rest of you, listen. I want you all to judge between Rosaleen and me.'

'Oh, this is fun!' said Rosaleen, clapping her hands—'to judge between us? Is it to play at a sort of court, or what is it?'

'It is not play at all,' answered Nina; 'it is sober and very solemn earnest. It is why I asked you Freres over to-night; it is why we have had our tea-party. I want to prove something. Fred, stand there, and don't stir.'

Fred, pale, and looking considerably frightened, approached the spot which Nina indicated.

'What is it for?' he said, looking at Peach.

'Hush!' replied Peach, letting out the sound with great unction.

Kenneth glanced at his brother. He felt very

much inclined to say, 'What rot!' but restrained himself.

Nina, her face a little pale, now took hold of Rosaleen's hand.

'Rosaleen,' she said, 'I want to say something very plainly. As to poor Amy, she is quite out of this. Amy is, I believe, a good child. She is very much the sort of child Peach is. They are both good; I do not know how they will grow up. I expect it depends on you and me.'

Rosaleen raised her pretty eyes and fixed them, with a dancing, audacious mixture of love, admiration, and anger, on Nina's face.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'I am coming soon to what I mean. Amy and Peach depend on us. We are leaders, you and I. Now, there cannot be two leaders in a camp. You belong to the Evens and I belong to the Odds; and we two families have always been great friends. I have been away at school for the last three years. I went away when I was twelve, quite a small girl; and I have returned now when I am fifteen, a big girl, and, compared to you, Rosaleen, nearly grown-up.'

'I am very big indeed for eleven, and I'll be twelve in three months' time,' said Rosaleen.

'A mere child; quite an infant,' said Nina in a scornful tone.

Rosaleen flushed, doubled up her little fist, and looked much inclined to aim a smart blow at Nina's ear. Nina saw the action, smiled slightly, and did not resent it.

'Never mind,' she said, touching the little girl on the shoulder; 'you will know presently exactly what I mean. If I hadn't gone away to school you wouldn't be in the position you occupy now, Rosaleen. I don't mean you to retain that position any longer.'

'What—do—you—mean?' asked Rosaleen, dropping out her words slowly. Her eyes flashed; she very nearly ground her teeth.

'Oh, quiet, my dear; do keep yourself composed. I want to say plainly to you Evens'—Nina glanced as she spoke at the four Freres—'and to you Odds'—here she looked at the Carlingfords—'that I am leader. There cannot be two leaders. When we meet I take the control. I do this by reason of the fact that I am longer in the world than Rosaleen, that I know more, that I am nearer the age of the grown-ups, that I have wisdom and tact, and that a little ignorant girl like Dark Rosaleen must be brought to know her place.'

'I won't. I hate you!' said Rosaleen.

'Wait a while, Rose. I have not done yet. Of course you are angry now; you will get over it. You have a very bad temper—have you not?'

'No, no, no!' here came from Prue and Patty, whose faces were turning very white.

'But you cannot quarrel with me in my own house,' said Nina, 'however angry you may feel; that would be terribly unfair. I want to state a case. There can be no possible quarrel to-night. Rosaleen, you acted extremely shabbily a week ago.'

'What did I do?' asked Rosaleen.

'You took Amy, who is a very good child, and would not have gone if you had not forced her, to the copse when you ought to have been in bed undergoing punishment. You went there; you took a lamp with you and food; there might have been an awful accident, and you might have caught your deaths of cold. As it was, you were both ill—very ill. But that was your affair and Amy's. I am quarrelling with you, Rosaleen, because when Fred came—Fred, who is a weak little fellow; he is a dear little boy, but he is not very strong; he has not got your character—when he came you led him to do as badly as you did yourself. You were all caught by your father, which is a great, great mercy, and you were all punished. But Fred should not have been punished as much as you; and if you had had any courage, Rosaleen, any sense of honour, you would have told that you were the ringleader, that on you the great punishment should have fallen.

You didn't do it; you let Fred bear as much blame as you, and you never said a word. I am not going to talk about your conduct to Amy; but I am ashamed of you, and I will have nothing to do with you after to-night unless'——

'Unless what?' said Rosaleen. She looked at her three sisters, she glanced at Kenneth, she looked at Malcolm; then, last of all, her eyes fell upon Fred Fred's face was like a sheet. He was clasping his hands tightly together.

'Oh, don't—don't, Nina!' came at last from his lips.

'Don't, Nina!' replied that young lady in a tone of immense spirit; 'but I shall, Fred. Rosaleen must know her place. Rosaleen has got to go on her knees and ask your forgiveness. Oh, you need not do it to-night, Rosaleen; but if you don't do it soon I declare solemnly here that there is war between the Odds and the Evens. Now you all know. That is all. Let us have another game.'

CHAPTER VI.

FOR A WEEK.

HE rest of the evening passed somehow. The children, both the Odds and the Evens, had flushed faces and sparkling eyes, and there was a storm of anger in each little heart, certainly in the hearts of the four little Freres; and they went away rather sooner than usual.

Nina was perfectly cheerful; she was sedulously polite, too, attending in particular to the wants of the Dark Rosaleen.

At last the Freres departed; they went over to their own house, but bed was now the order of the hour. Prue and Patty could not say a word to Rosaleen and Amy. It was not until the next morning that Rosaleen declared her firm resolve never, never to yield to Nina's imperious orders.

'She certainly was very bad last night,' remarked Prue; 'she was most fierce and unpleasant.'

'I don't mean to speak to her any more,' said Rosaleen. 'You can, of course, if you like, Prue, and so can you, Patty; but if she thinks that *I* am going on my knees to anybody'——

'Well, well!' exclaimed Prue, 'I must go round and have a talk with them; this will never do. We cannot live without the friendship of the Carlingfords; they are our own great special friends.'

Rosaleen here sprang to her feet; she clenched her fists; her eyes shone; her teeth gleamed.

'If there is a person in all the world that I hate —hate—*hate*,' she cried, 'it is Nina Carlingford. She is horrid; she is ugly; she is nasty. I will not speak to her again; and I forbid you, Amy, to speak to her again; and if you do I'll pull your hair, and I'll pinch you, and I'll tell you the most horrid stories when you are going to bed, all about goblins and sprites and wicked, wicked fairies, and you won't have a minute's peace; and I'll do it all if you ever speak to Nina again. I won't go under to her, that I won't.'

'You're in a passion now,' said Patty, 'and not quite sure of what you are saying. Let's talk it over for a week. I am going to see Nina; she must not be cruel. She is a great deal older than

you, and she ought to have some sense. But we cannot really, truly quarrel with the Carlingfords; we cannot truly.'

'I am certain of one thing,' cried Amy—here she burst into sobs—'I'm certain sure that Fred, my little half-twin, doesn't like it a bit.'

'Oh, Fred!—he isn't worth thinking of,' said Rosaleen; 'poor little mousy boy! I don't think at all of Fred.'

'He is a very nice little boy,' answered Amy. 'Oh dear, oh dear! and I could have taught him spelling that beautiful. I know he could have learned. I like Peach, too, very well, though she is so ignorant.'

'I hate people who are not ignorant,' said Rosaleen. 'I hate knowledged people. I hate people who go to school and learn their lessons. I hate people who spell. I hate people who talk grand. I like ignorants; those are the people I like. And I mean to run away and be a gipsy; that's what I mean to do. I'll be Queen of the Gipsies, and I'll never see horrid Nina Carlingford again. But I tell you what; when she's married, and has got a husband and a child of her own, I'll steal it, 'cos all gipsies steal children of the people they hate. I'll steal it—that's what I'll do. You tell her when you go over, Prue, to marry quick, and tell her to have a

child quick, and tell her to love it tremendous, and I'll steal it, 'cos I'll be Queen of the Gipsies. But there,' she added, 'I needn't wait for that. Nina is very fond of Peach; I'll steal Peach. Yes, I will. She needn't think I'm going under to her, 'cos I'm not. Oh, I hate her! I hate her!'

Prue and Patty thought it best now to leave the angry Rosaleen to her own reflections. In the course of the day they called upon Nina; they called, offering in their own small persons a flag of truce.

'Do, Nina, be reasonable,' said Patty. 'You know perfectly well that Rosaleen is only a baby compared to you.'

Nina was looking extremely placid. It was not her way to get very angry; it was her way to take the lead in a quiet, effective style. She could never storm like Rosaleen; she could never give way to torrents of angry words.

'What is the matter?' she said, looking placidly at the sisters. 'Patty, my dear, what a very pretty frock! Is it your new frock for next term?'

'Yes. Do you like it?' replied Patty. 'Mother and I chose it. It is shepherd's plaid; and I am to have a little coat to match, and a cap the same. I think it is very pretty.'

'So do I. I like it awfully,' said Nina. 'And you are so pretty yourself, you know, Patty.'

'But now, Nina darling,' cried Prue, 'do be reasonable. You cannot expect poor little Rosaleen to go on her knees to Fred, and to beg his pardon.'

'I don't,' said Nina.

'Then that's all right, Nina; we knew it,' said Patty, with a cry of relief. 'We knew you were only pretending. You will let her know that you don't expect it. You only said it to frighten her.'

'No, I didn't,' said Nina. 'I told Rosaleen plainly what I expected. If she does not go on her knees I shall not speak to her again; and what is more, Prue and Patty, although I like you both very much, and I like little Amy after a fashion, yet I shall not let my brothers and sister speak to you either. There will be a split between us—a big, big quarrel. I am leader, and Rosaleen has got to obey me. Once she does obey me, I'll be as nice to her as possible; I'll help her.'

'She won't do it,' answered Patty. 'I cannot—cannot believe you are in earnest, Nina.'

'Now, look here,' said Nina. 'I do this—for of course Ken does not like it, and of course Malcolm does not like it, and poor little Fred has been crying himself half sick, and even my little Peach thinks me very cruel—because I know I am in the right. Rosaleen must go under. She will be intolerable

when she grows up if she goes on in this fashion. I will give her a week—I will give you all a week—that will be more than the middle of the Easter holidays. There will be only a few days to the end; and at the end of a week—this day week—I will ask mother to let us go on a picnic, and then Rosaleen will be asked once more whether she will obey or whether she won't; and if she says no, and we see that she means no, why, there will be a split, that's all. But for the next week we will go on as usual. You had better use your influence, Prue; and you, Patty.'

'Shall we tell mother?' asked Patty, very gloomily.

'No, don't do anything of the sort; this is our own affair. It concerns us children, and I don't choose that our parents should be worried over the matter.'

'I suppose it would be best not,' said Patty; 'mother would think it great nonsense, and so would father.'

Nina coloured now somewhat uncomfortably; then she rose slowly.

'I have a lot to do,' she remarked. 'Perhaps you had better go back now, girls.'

'But you will at least love us and be friendly during the week?' said Patty. 'It seems awful that

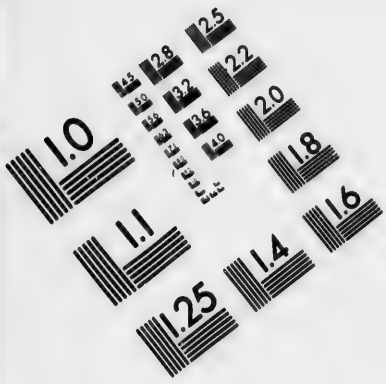
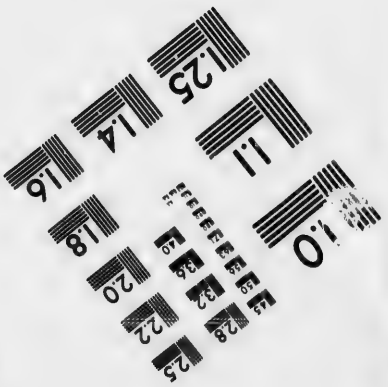


IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (MT-3)



Photographic Sciences Corporation

23 WEST MAIN STREET
WEBSTER, N.Y. 14580
(716) 872-4503

a quarrel like this should be forced upon us; but for a week at least we will be as usual?'

'Yes,' answered Nina. She went up to the two girls and kissed each of them on their rosy cheeks.

CHAPTER VII.

NINA THE INCORRIGIBLE.

HE week passed with great outward placidity. The Odds and the Evens constantly met. They met not only daily, but many times a day. Mrs Carlingford and Dr and Mrs Frere had not the slightest suspicion that there was anything wrong. The children met, walked together, had tea together, visited each other in their respective homes just as frequently as they had always done in all the holidays as long as they could remember. Not a word was said of the cloud which was hanging over their heads.

As to Nina, she had never made herself more agreeable and unselfish; and although she very firmly and decidedly took the lead as far as her own little band was concerned, she was particularly gracious and even humble in her manner to Rosaleen. Nina was biding her time.

Rosaleen was the only person during that week of probation who showed where her thoughts really were; for Rosaleen was silent, not to say sulky, in Nina's presence, except when in a quick whirl she changed her manners and became extremely lively and laughing and brilliant, encouraging the others to insurrection, and looking at Nina with intense insubordination.

Nina took no notice of this expression in Rosaleen's wicked and yet beautiful eyes. She knew that the hour of her own triumph was close at hand. She did not know whether she was glad or sorry; she only knew one thing—that keep to her resolve she must.

It had been decided that at the end of the Easter holidays Nina was to go to London to have special lessons in drawing and music until the summer holidays. Her mother was making considerable preparations for the young girl's first visit to the Metropolis, and Nina was herself full of interest in her pretty new frocks and in all the preparations for the time she would be away. She was to spend about a year with an aunt in London, and then come home for good. Of course her holidays would be spent at home. The rest of the Carlingfords and all the Freres would still live on at Warrencliffe, there being excellent means of education in that thriving town.

But Nina was to go to London, and the other children, in spite of themselves, felt an immense and added respect for her in consequence.

At last the day before that on which the great decision was to be made arrived. The weather was particularly fine. The Easter holidays extended themselves into the third week of April; the sky, day after day, was blue and cloudless; the trees were all putting on their fresh glory of green; the birds were singing; even the cuckoo was heard.

Mrs Carlingford was not greatly surprised when Nina came to her on the morning before the day of the picnic and made her suggestion.

'You know, mother,' she said, 'that I am going to London on the 22nd. To-morrow will be the 18th; and we all want, as the weather is so fine, a great and special treat.'

'And what is that, darling?' asked Mrs Carlingford, looking with admiration at her handsome, gallant-looking girl.

'We want to go on a picnic, mother,' replied Nina. 'We want to go as far as Morland Towers.'

'But Morland Towers is five miles away,' said Mrs Carlingford.

Yes, mummy; but you may trust me with the pony-carriage—you really may; and the Freres have got their governess-cart. We want to drive out

there immediately after breakfast, or as soon after as we can get away, and take our dinner with us, and our tea; and we will be back late.'

'And you do not wish any grown-up person to go with you, I suppose,' remarked Mrs Carlingford, gazing out of the window, and then giving a wistful glance at Nina.

Nina flew to her mother and hugged her.

'You darling little mother,' she cried, 'I would love beyond anything to have you; but it is very important, and it only means us children. Another time, mummy darling, you must come; but not to-morrow.'

'All right, dearest. Then you wish me to give directions to the cook. You want a big hamper packed, and—— But are you going to take things for the Freres as well?'

'Yes, on this occasion I think I should like to,' answered Nina, pausing in deep reflection. 'Perhaps they could bring a cake or two; but we will bring most of the grist to the mill. Thank you, mother; that is splendid.'

Nina stood for a little longer, discoursing of those viands which would be most appreciated by the Odds and the Evens.

'That is such a funny name you have the habit of calling yourselves,' said Mrs Carlingford.

'It is a good name,' replied Nina in a tone of reflection. 'It means a great deal; it may even mean in the future more than it does now. But I must not say any more, mummy darling. You are a dear; you always do what you can to make us happy.'

Nina ran out of the room. In the passage she came plump up against Kenneth. Kenneth was very tall for his age, and rather thin. He had a sallow face, not unlike Peach's, and big dark eyes and sensitive lips. He and Nina made a great contrast, and both were handsome in their way. When Kenneth came to man's estate he would be as fine-looking a young fellow as heart of mother could desire.

Nina now looked at him attentively.

'Where are you off to?' he asked, taking hold of her hands and looking into her face.

'You know what a great day to-morrow is,' answered Nina.

Kenneth's face became grave.

'I wish you would let me talk to you for a moment, Nina,' he said.

'I will listen to you, Ken. I am always willing to listen to any one who wants to give me a little instruction,' said Nina, half-laughing, half-pouting.

He followed her into the next room and shut the door.

'Now, you are not going on with that ridiculous thing?' he exclaimed.

'With what ridiculous thing, Kenneth? I do not understand you.'

'You do understand me, and perfectly. It is all rot, and cannot be permitted for a moment. Malcolm and I have been talking about it, and it's too ridiculous. Why, do you know, Nina, that you are absolutely making two families perfectly wretched? We don't want to quarrel. We are very fond of the Freres, and they are very fond of us; and just because a little monkey like Rosaleen chooses to do a downright naughty thing we are to have a regular split. Why, what will mother say?'

'Nothing,' replied Nina.

'What do you mean by that?'

'She won't know anything about it. She is never to know; that will be in the bargain. If it is war to the knife, one of the conditions of war to the knife is that the parents in both houses are to know nothing—nothing—nothing.'

'And you seriously mean,' said Kenneth, 'not to speak to any of the Freres if that little goose of a Rose does not go on her knees to Fred? You don't

Nina uttered her cruel words without the smallest change of colour.

PAGE 83

colour.
PAGE 83

suppose she will go on her knees to a little chap like Fred—do you, Nina?'

'I certainly do not,' answered Nina; 'at least not yet. She will after a time, and she will have learned her lesson for life; but we are certain to have our battle, Ken, and exciting it will be.'

'Horrid, you mean,' said Kenneth. 'I am very angry and very much annoyed. I don't think you ought to do it, Nina, and I don't think I ought to allow it. If mother knew she would put a stop to it double quick, and she ought to know. Malcolm and I have been talking, and we say she ought to know.'

Nina's face turned a little pale now. She reflected for a moment; then she remarked quietly:

'You can tell mother, of course; the only difference will be that I shall not speak to any of you then. You and the Freres can be friends—great friends; and the Dark Rosaleen shall be your leader; and I won't speak to you, and I won't come home in the summer, nor at Christmas. I will stay in London, and forget that I have got brothers and a sister. Mother can come to see me up there sometimes. I will never come back; that is all. You have got to have a split with me if you have not with the Freres; that's all.'

Kenneth's face looked horrified. Nina uttered her

cruel words without the smallest change of colour, without the least attempt at modifying them. There was a determined expression in the curve of that short and exquisitely-cut upper lip of hers; there was a determined expression in her big blue eyes; her colour became more vivid and more lovely than usual; and she gave a slight defiant, and yet absolutely composed, gesture with her haughty little head.

'You know I cannot give you up,' said Kenneth; 'you know what you are to me. You are the eldest of us all, and I have always, always loved you.'

'Oh, I know, Ken, dear old boy; and so have I loved you. Of course you cannot give me up. This won't last long, Kenneth. Let me have my way. Believe me, I am in the right.'

'I hate it,' said Kenneth. 'Are you quite, quite sure you won't'——

'Yield to that little girl?' cried Nina. 'No, Ken. You would not respect me if I did—now, would you?'

'Oh! you would coax anything out of a fellow,' replied the boy.

'I would—I would,' she answered in a tone of triumph. She ran up to her brother, put her soft arms round his neck, and kissed him.

'Come out for a walk with me,' she said. 'Let's forget the Freres. You would never forsake me—would you, Ken?'

'I wouldn't, because I couldn't; but, all the same, it's beastly unfair,' exclaimed the boy.

'Never mind whether it's fair or unfair; it's Nina's way—Nina the incorrigible,' said the girl. 'Now I am going for my hat and jacket. We'll take a jolly stroll; it is such a perfect day.'

During their walk Nina made herself so intensely agreeable—indeed, so fascinating—to Kenneth that when he got home again he was more her slave than ever. When Malcolm tried to snub him about her, Kenneth refused to listen. He said:

'It's Nina's way. There never was any one like her. I suppose it will do Rosaleen good; but it's a beastly nuisance all the same.'

'Then you mean to submit?' cried Malcolm. 'You are not going to tell mother?'

'I cannot. I cannot split on Nina, my own sister.'

'When she is shabby and mean she ought not to be upheld,' said Malcolm.

'All the same, I shall not split on her,' answered Kenneth; 'and you cannot, Malcolm. We have got to take her side, to see the thing through. It's horrid; but the Freres must understand.'

Malcolm looked almost as gloomy as Kenneth had done an hour before.

'I wish she had never come back,' he cried.

'No; do not say that. There never was her equal —never. It will come right, you 'll see.'

In the Frere family there were also many comments with regard to the picnic of the next day. Invitations had come in Nina's handwriting for each of the children. A delightful picnic was in view, and yet their hearts were heavy. Prue and Patty were never tired of talking the thing over. They talked it up and down, and round and round, and inside out and outside in; they talked at it and of it, from every possible point of view; and always, always, the two little girls came back to the same resolution: that they must stick up for Rosaleen, and that Rosaleen was certain, as certain as that day followed night, not to give in.

Rosaleen herself was very busy and important. She had got over her first passion, and was rather inclined to pride herself on the very distinguished position she was now occupying in the family.

'It depends on me,' she said, turning to Amy; 'it depends altogether on me whether we two families are talking to each other and loving each other, or are grim and silent and hating each other worse than poison, after this time to-morrow. You had better

be pleasant to me, Amy, for you'll have very little of anybody else to talk to during all the years that are to come. It's a feud—that's what I call it; it's an awful, terrible feud; and I could prevent it, but I won't. Do you think these knees of mine will bend? No, not for a hundred Nina Carlingfords. But I am going to be very, very particular what I wear at the picnic to-morrow; and, Amy, you must uphold me, and always let me get well to the front, and you must be a trifle dowdy to-morrow, Amy.'

'Oh, but why?' asked Amy. 'I am always very particular about my dress. I like to be so neat, my hair brushed so smooth, and my boots and gloves and everything so perfect.'

'Oh, you were never born a child!' said Rosaleen in a voice of passion. 'What with your spelling and your neatnesses, I'm sure I'm going to have an awful time. I pity myself terribly. I wouldn't yield, not for anything; but I do pity myself. You're an awful old maid of a little sister. You were never meant to be married, and you were never meant to have any fun, and were born as old—as old as Old Peter, whom we see when we go to the country. You're ten years old in years, but in your face and in your ways you're eighty; you're eighty, and you're old for eighty—that's what you are.'

Here Rosaleen turned on her heel and marched out of the room.

The next day arose brilliantly, and all the children prepared for the great expedition. They were to drive themselves. No servants and no grown-up people were to interfere. The Carlingford pony-carriage would hold all the Carlingfords. Nina was to drive, and Kenneth was to sit beside her on the box. Inside the carriage Fred, Peach, and Malcolm were to disport themselves.

The Freres' governess-cart would hold the four children, Patty driving the pony. They were to meet outside the Carlingfords' house, and were to start sharp at eleven. The picnic baskets were packed and the children were ready. Rosaleen was the last to come downstairs.

Rosaleen had attired herself with great care for this festive day. She had coaxed their own special maid, Ellen, to wash her hair on the previous night, and then to crimp it; and, being already very thick and very black, it now stood out round her little person like a huge mane. It reached below her waist, and was so fuzzy and tremendously thick that it almost hid her shoulders. She admired her hair immensely, and exclaimed, pulling forward a lock as she spoke, and glancing at Amy:

'I am like Samson: my strength is in my hair.

You don't suppose a person like me will bend. No, never!'

Amy sighed. By Rosaleen's directions she was dressed in her shabby old winter clothes; but she had ventured to put on a new hat. Rosaleen now glanced at it critically.

'Not a bit of it,' she said; 'off it goes. On with the old felt.'

'But the felt is so shabby,' cried Amy. 'It got wet so often in the winter.'

'On with the felt,' ordered Rosaleen. 'My little crimson cap won't show off unless you are shabby, and my crimson cloak and black velvet frock and red gloves will look nothing unless you are a dowd. You do very well in gray; you're not seen much unless you are close. That's all right. Now then, come along. I look like the Queen of the Gipsies to-day—don't I?'

Rosaleen certainly did look particularly handsome, and Amy, as she followed her, said to herself:

'Dear, dear, what trials there are in the world with having a silly sort of handsome sister of the Rosaleen kind!'

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DECLARATION.

THE Carlingfords took the lead as they drove to Morland Towers; the Freres, however, were only a few paces behind them. At last they reached their destination. The Towers was one of the show-places in the neighbourhood. It was a very old building, dating back from the time of the Normans. It had a moat and a drawbridge, and there were grounds surrounding it, and walls, and gates which were generally locked.

The two carriages drew up outside the gates, and the custodian came forward and unlocked them. Kenneth paid the necessary fee for admission, and the little party went in. Under special conditions people were allowed to picnic in the old ruins, and Kenneth and Nina now made arrangements with the custodian for this purpose. As the days were not too warm

up to the present, Nina suggested that they should use one of the stone rooms, and she further promised that she would supply them with plates and spoons and knives and forks. This, after a little demur, was arranged; and then the children, in solemn procession, went round the ruins. They had seen them many times before; but that did not matter. A picnic was a picnic, the fascination of being away from home several miles without a single grown-up person had also its charm; but above all other excitements was the thought of that moment which was to follow the picnic feast.

They had just got inside the first thick Norman arch, when Nina, who looked very handsome in dark blue, and a neat little sailor-hat, turned round and solemnly held out her hand to Rosaleen.

'How do you do?' she said, and bending forward, to the little girl's astonishment and disgust, kissed her on her lips.

'Welcome, Rosaleen,' she said; 'let us be happy while we may. You come with me, Rose. You have seen these ruins before; you shall see them with me to-day.'

Rosaleen coloured crimson, and felt very much inclined to say 'No;' but Prue whispered to her:

'It's *Pax*, you know; we must be friendly until the right moment comes.'

'Oh, all right, if that's the way,' said Rosaleen. She shook her thick mane of hair, and walked on in front with Nina. The little girl and the tall one looked rather funny as they walked side by side. The rest of the Carlingfords and Freres gazed after them with apprehension.

'I suppose,' exclaimed Prue, turning to Kenneth, 'when we are going back to-night we won't be speaking.'

'Oh, it's horrid! Don't let us talk of it,' replied Kenneth.

'Very well,' answered Prue; 'but I should like to tell you now, Ken, and you, Malcolm, and all the rest of you Carlingfords, that Patty and I and Amy have no bad feelings towards you; in fact, we are fonder of you than ever.'

'I am fit to cry about it,' said Patty; and she sat down on the nearest stone, and tears filled her pretty brown eyes.

'I do wish Nina had never come back,' she cried. 'We were quite satisfied with our own Dark Rosaleen. Why should our lives be made wretched just because Nina has come back?'

'Oh, it's not that,' said Kenneth gloomily. 'Nina and I had a talk over the thing yesterday, and she seems to think she is doing Rosaleen an inestimable service.'

'I don't know what "inestimable" quite means,' replied Patty.

'Oh, I do,' said Amy, now coming forward; 'it's in my spelling-list. Can you spell it, Patty? Would you like to try?'

'Not a bit,' cried Patty. 'Oh, do go off with your spelling, Amy! Well, all I can say is, I wish Nina was not so particular about our Rosaleen's character. We would much rather she didn't do her a service, Ken.'

Patty and Prue talked a little longer, and then they examined the ruins side by side.

Meanwhile Rosaleen was listening to Nina. Nina was making herself intensely agreeable. She was bringing out all that fund of fascination and charm which she so largely possessed.

'Don't let us think about the afternoon, Rosaleen,' she said. 'Let the afternoon take care of itself. Do you know, I admire you so much; you are so awfully handsome?'

'Am I?' said Rosaleen, bridling. 'Well, I have thought so myself; but mother says when I am in my best things I look downright ugly. Do you think it is because I am specially handsome that she says it in order to keep me from being conceited?'

Nina could not help laughing.

'Well, that may be your mother's opinion,' she replied. 'I am not called to say whether she is right or wrong; but I think you handsome; and when you are grown-up you may be beautiful. You could be grand every way, Rosaleen—every way.'

'Don't begin to lecture,' cried Rosaleen, 'because I can't bear it. I would like to be the handsomest girl in all the place, and to have everybody looking at me, and jealous 'cos of me. I don't want to be a good girl—not a bit.'

Nina gave her a comical glance.

'You think,' she remarked after a moment's pause, 'that people will make a great fuss about you if you are naughty? You are greatly mistaken; people like good girls. Good, handsome girls can have a splendid time; but I am not going to lecture. May I tell you some of the funny stories that happened at my school in Brussels?'

'Oh, please!' said Rosaleen. 'Are they the sort of stories that make your hair stand up?'

'Horrors, you mean?'

'They can't be too horrid,' cried Rosaleen. 'I hate tame stories. I like goblins, and I like their faces to be awful wicked; and I like sprites and wicked fairies. I have such fun at night frightening Amy. Amy will do anything for me if I promise not to frighten her at night. Do give me a new story

to hold over Amy; it will be a great, great comfort when I have no one in all the world but her to talk to.'

Nina gave a sigh.

'Let us sit down here,' she said. 'I know some horrors; you shall have them.'

She made up the stories as she went along, and Rosaleen listened with bated breath and crimson cheeks. They continued their walk together, and Rosaleen had to own to herself that, when she was not hating Nina with all her heart and soul and strength, she was having a very good time.

'When I forget to hate her I am sort of comfortable,' she admitted to herself; 'but when I look at her and remember all, it is awful, awful.'

At last the other children summoned the two ringleaders to the feast, which was prepared in an old room in which William the Conqueror was supposed to have dined. The walls, ceiling and all, were of solid stone; the windows were destitute of glass, and the spring air came softly through them. Ivy in thick masses hung over the windows; and the children sat in a curious kind of bower of old masonry and spring green. The picnic baskets contained delicious food; and, notwithstanding the ordeal which was not close at hand, they were all sufficiently hungry to enjoy the feast. They sat

mixed up together, as Prue was fond of saying afterwards.

'Just,' Prue used to relate, 'as if we were friends for all our lives. There was Ken sitting next to me, and Malcolm next to Patty, and helping her so nicely to the very choicest bits; and Amy scrooged up close to Fred; and Peach, and Nina, and even Rosaleen chatting and laughing, and sharing the same plates. Oh! we were jolly; and we cracked jokes, and we had all kinds of memories going about. It is always exciting when you begin to say, "Don't you remember?" and we had a whole lot of "Don't you remembers?" during that picnic feast. But we none of us said a word about what we were to do in the future. We none of us ventured to say, "Don't you think we might?" Oh! it is so exciting when you begin to say, "Don't you think we might?" It was all "Don't you remember? Don't you remember?" Oh! it was a lovely, exciting, wonderful time. It was all too short—all too short.'

The picnic feast came to an end. Even the oranges and bananas were consumed, to the very last portion of the orange and the very last scrap of the banana. Even the dessert biscuits were finished to the final crumb. And then Nina glanced round her and said:

'Where shall we go? It is time for the council

of war to sit; it is time for us to come to a decision. You choose where we are to go, Rosaleen. You are the youngest; you shall have the choice.'

'Thank you,' replied Rosaleen.

'It feels awfully like a duel,' said Prue. 'I wonder if there ought to be seconds. It 's fearfully exciting.'

'Oh, don't!' whispered Patty. 'I feel as if I would burst out crying in a minute.'

'Then, if you do,' exclaimed Amy, 'I 'll pound spelling into you for the next three months whenever I look at you.'

'I 'll keep back my tears rather than undergo that punishment,' was Patty's spirited reply.

Rosaleen ran out for a moment to look around her. The sky was cloudless. All the dear little spring flowers were coming out; there were lots of primroses in a lovely dell at one side of the old grounds; there was a grassy sward there too. The grass was very dry; there had not been rain for a long time.

'I have found the exact place,' cried Rosaleen. She ran back.

Nina took her hand. They went together, in front of the others, down to the grassy knoll.

'Don't you think you 're an awful little goose?' said Nina, looking at Rosaleen. 'It rests with you;

you have a chance yet. Well, I won't say any more, and I ought not to say even that.'

Rosaleen's eyes flashed, and she pulled herself together. And now all the Carlingfords stood on one side of the grassy sward, and from six to seven feet away the four Freres stationed themselves.

Nina now came forward, and beckoned Rosaleen to do the same. Nina stood a foot or two in front of her sister and brothers.

Peach longed for the ground to open and swallow her up. She felt that she must rush at Amy and hug her; that she must clasp Prue round the neck, and Patty round the neck; that she could not give them up.

Kenneth and Malcolm now looked the one at the other.

'It is all the most horrid rot,' they thought; but nevertheless Kenneth went and stood just behind Nina. Fred turned whiter and whiter.

'Come out here, Fred,' ordered Nina; 'you stand just there. Now, Rosaleen, are you ready?'

'I am,' replied Rosaleen. She caught her crimson cap and flung it on the grass; the breeze took up her jet-black hair and blew it about her head. Rosaleen panted and struggled, and unfastened her little cloak, and it fell from her shoulders. Never

was a more picturesque-looking, wild creature. Nina looked, too, just as handsome in her way.

'You know the conditions, Rosaleen,' she said. 'You committed a great injustice; you can make it up. Kneel before Fred and say, "I am sorry that I did not tell about my own wicked conduct the other night. I am sorry that I allowed you to be punished. Forgive me." That is all, Rosaleen; and we shall go back the happiest and most united families in the world, and we will think an awful lot of you. That is what you have got to do.'

Nina paused. Rosaleen was gazing straight up at the sky. She was pretending not to hear a single word that Nina had said. She was straightening her legs until they felt like two ramrods.

'Knees,' she whispered under her breath. 'I haven't no knees.' She was thinking a thousand thoughts, and they were mostly concerned with her proud little self, and her glowing black eyes continued to look at the sky.

'You know what will happen if you refuse,' said Nina; and now her voice was almost pleading. 'We will have a battle—an open battle—we Carlingfords against you Freres; we Odds against you Evens. You can go your own way, and we will go ours during all the future of our lives; but never, never, never shall we love each other again, or speak to

each other again, or have dealings one with the other, until you, Rosaleen, bend your proud knees and confess your sin.'

Rosaleen still gazed up at the sky. She had now closed her small brown hands; there was a twinkling look of mischief and merriment in her eyes. She did not seem at all grieved nor at all dismayed at the awful prospect of the break between the Carlingfords and the Freres.

'Of course our mother and your father and mother are not to know,' cried Nina; 'but we children will feel it. There is to be war unless you yield. Now then, Rosaleen?'

'There is to be war!' exclaimed Rosaleen, dropping her eyes all of a sudden, and fixing them with a great glow of triumph, and almost of malice, on Nina's face; 'for I will never bend my knees, and I will never say I am sorry. There is to be war!'

There was a deep silence after Rosaleen had spoken.

'Is that your firm resolve? Are you certain?' asked Nina; and there was more pleading than ever in her tones.

'I am as positive as that I am alive,' replied Rosaleen; and she turned and walked quickly away all by herself.

The rest of the little party gazed at each other with dismay in their eyes.

Even Nina uttered a short sigh.

'Little goose!' she exclaimed. 'Well, if she must learn her lesson, she must. Now then, children, we must arrange terms. War has been declared. We are not to speak to each other, if possible; we are never to be really friendly; if we meet, as we must meet sometimes, just to prevent our parents suspecting anything, we must be cold, indifferent. I bind over my family, the Odds, to keep the rules of this warfare; and you, Prudence, who are the eldest of your family, must bind yours over to a similar contract. To-night Kenneth and I will draw up the full rules of this war which has begun between the Odds and the Evens. He will make two copies, one for you and one for us. To the conditions of this war we must each make our solemn promise that we will faithfully adhere.'

CHAPTER IX.

A KISS FROM MOTHER.

THE Freres started for home ten minutes before the Carlingfords. The Freres were silent all the way home. Even Amy was too depressed to offer any spelling suggestions. Rosaleen, however, held her proud little head very high, shook out her thick mane, and regarded her subjects, as she now considered the rest of the Frere children, with marked disapproval. As they were entering the town she spoke for the first time.

'Well, I'd have more spirit,' said Rosaleen. 'I wouldn't sink so utter as you're doing. If it's war, it ought to be war with spirit. What's the use of being so angry? We can get on without those horrid Carlingfords.'

Still the others did not reply; and Rosaleen glanced at them anxiously.

'What is that in your eye?' she exclaimed suddenly, bending forward towards Prue and looking at her attentively. 'A tear!' cried Rosaleen, with withering scorn. 'I'm bitterly 'shamed.'

Poor Prue very nearly shed a torrent of tears at Rosaleen's words. Patty now took up the defence.

'We have all been geese from first to last,' she said. 'You are the second youngest in the family, and why should you make us all miserable? Of course, the thing is done, and we must go through with it; but it shan't last long. You say you won't bend your knees. We will lead you such a life, miss, that you will bend your knees, and that before a week is out.'

'Oh, will you?' answered Rosaleen. 'Will you? But what do you think about me running away?'

'Nonsense!' replied Patty; 'don't talk like that. I shall have to speak to mother about sending you to a strict school. You're getting too much of your own way, miss; that's what you are.'

Rosaleen lent back with considerable vigour and weight against Amy.

'Don't,' cried Amy; 'you're almost knocking me out of the cart.'

'I can't help it,' said Rosaleen. 'I am battered with all the warlike weapons that Patty is throwing at me. I don't think Patty is much of an ally. I

have been reading up all about battles, and those on your side stick to you.'

'Of course we 'll stick by you, you little bit of an oddity,' returned Patty; 'but we are shocked and disgusted all the same.'

They entered the house in such extremely low spirits that Mrs Frere asked in some alarm if any of the little party were ill.

'Oh no,' answered Patty; 'we are quite well.'

'I have not the slightest doubt,' remarked Mrs Frere, 'that you have been eating something unwholesome. I really must speak to my dear friend, Mrs Carlingford, about the sort of food she gives you. It is not suitable for young people.'

'We had a perfectly 'licious meal,' said Rosaleen; 'and you need not speak about it, mother, 'cos we 're not going to get ill; and there will be nothing that the Carlingfords give us in the future that could make us ill.' She ran away as she spoke.

'How handsome Rosaleen looks!' said Mrs Frere; 'but, all the same, I think her eyes are too bright; and when I kissed her just now her lips were hot. I do trust the child has not taken a chill.'

'I tell you what it is, mother,' said Prue; 'Rosaleen ought to go to school.'

'To school, dear Prue? But she does go to school.'

'Oh, I mean a very severe sort of boarding-school,' replied Prue. 'She is getting too much a will of her own.'

'Now, my dear Prudence, I think you are quite hard on your little sister. Rosaleen is a very spirited child; but I always could manage her. She has the warmest heart in the world. She would be dreadfully misunderstood at school. I would not send her to school for the world; at least to a school where she could not come home every evening.'

Prue did not say any more. It was one of the most staunch conditions of the warfare that the parents of the contending parties should know nothing about the battle which was raging between them. She presently left the room, accompanied by Patty; and Mrs Frere, after considering for a moment, went upstairs to the room where the two younger children were preparing their lessons—that is, Amy was trying to prepare hers. She had her books before her, neatly arranged as usual. There was her own little pad of blotting-paper on the table, and her own pen and her little bottle of ink, and her copybook. Oh, how neat, how very neat, Amy's copybooks always were! Her exercise-books were also equal models of neatness; no blots, the writing even and quite correct, the little sentences sharp and to the point. Amy's teachers adored her.

Who would not adore such a specially good little girl? She was conning her spelling and looking with pride at her last French exercise when her mother came in.

Rosaleen, without any books before her, was leaning her two elbows on the table at the opposite side. She was staring gloomily at Amy.

'Well, my darling,' said the mother as she entered the room; 'busy as usual. That's right. Ah, my dear little Amy! you are making nice progress, so your teachers tell me. It is very good of you, dear, to prepare your lessons through the holidays. You will be nice and forward when term begins.'

'Well, mother,' replied Amy, looking up briskly, 'I cannot possibly be idle; at least not to-night.'

'And why not to-night, dearest?'

'Oh, nothing,' cried Amy.

'Tell-tale-tit,' whispered Rosaleen, in a hoarse, tragic voice, from her side of the table.

'I haven't told,' answered Amy.

Mrs Frere was a wise enough mother never to intrude into family secrets which were not meant for her ears. She recognised the fact that children have their own world, into which, if they are really and thoroughly to enjoy it, and get the good of it, no grown-ups ought ever to enter. She did not inquire, therefore, with regard to Rosaleen's mys-

terious words, but, looking full at the little girl, said:

'Amy is quite right. Term begins almost immediately; you ought to be looking over your lessons, too, Rosaleen.'

'Oh no, mother,' answered Rosaleen. She shook her head as she spoke.

'But why "Oh no"? Don't you want to do well next term?'

'No, mother,' answered Rosaleen. 'I want to do badly.'

'My dear child, what a very dreadful thing to say!'

'I cannot help it, mother. There is every sort of wickedness I could do,' continued Rosaleen, looking solemnly with big gloomy eyes at her mother as she spoke, 'except the wickedness of telling lies. I cannot tell a lie, and I won't. If I had pretended to you to-night that I was going to be a good girl next term it would be a monstrous black lie. Amy might be able to tell it, but I couldn't.'

'I am sure,' exclaimed Amy, 'you're horrid unkind to me. Mother, I wish you would stop her. It isn't fair—is it, mother?—that she should say things of that sort.'

'It is very unfair, and extremely naughty,' said Mrs Frere. 'Come here, Rosaleen.'

Mrs Frere sat down in a low chair. Rosaleen approached her unwillingly. Was her mother going to scold? In truth, the little girl greatly admired her own conduct, and was much dismayed by the attitude which her three sisters had now assumed towards her. If her mother was going to assume the same attitude, and to scold her for what, after all, she did not think at all wrong, her heart, she felt, would break.

'Oh mummy!' she began; and she raised pleading eyes to her mother's face.

In reply, Mrs Frere held out her arms and clasped the child to her heart.

'Oh mummy, now that is 'licious!' cried the Dark Rosaleen. Mrs Frere smoothed back her hair and kissed her for two or three minutes. Only little girls like Rosaleen know, and only mothers like Mrs Frere know, what immense comfort there is in that sort of caress. It is fifty times better than solid words; it is a thousand times better than punishment. It seems to wipe out the naughtiness with a cool and soothing hand. It seems to arrange the disordered thoughts; to give fresh courage, fresh hope.

'Oh mummy! oh mummy!' gasped Rosaleen.

'My little girl will try to be good,' said Mrs Frere then.

'Oh mummy!'

'Little darling, I won't ask you any more just now. I know you will, my child; I know you will.'

Mrs Frere got up; Rosaleen stood silent. As the mother was leaving the room she stooped and kissed Amy, and patted her on her smooth head.

'My good, dear little girl!' she exclaimed. The door closed behind her. The two little sisters glanced at each other.

'There never was any one like her,' said Amy. 'Don't you think so, Rose?'

'Yes,' answered Rose; 'she is filling up my heart.'

'What do you mean?'

'I must cry,' replied Rosaleen. 'I must go out and have a good roaring cry, the kind with sobs and shrieks now and then. I am going to the farthest end of the garden. Nobody will hear, and when I come back it will be all right.'

'But you will try to be good,' pleaded Amy.

'Oh yes, you little bit of neatness and stuck-up-ness,' answered Rosaleen. 'I will try to be good. But don't you think it is on account of you, and don't you think it is on account of Patty and of Prue, nor any of those horrid Carlingfords; it's because of mother.'

'Then, perhaps,' cried Amy, rushing up to her, 'you'll bend your knee?'

'Bend it?' exclaimed Rosaleen. 'It's stiffened for ever and ever. Don't talk to me about bending. I'll be good, but not that sort of goodness.'

She rushed away, flying through the house in her accustomed style, and out into the garden.

The garden, as has been already explained, was large, and no one heard Rosaleen's sobs and little shrieks of agony. When, as she expressed it, she had quite emptied her heart, and was cool and composed once more, she returned to the house. She was a very gentle Rosaleen for the rest of that evening.

CHAPTER X.

RULES OF WAR.

EANWHILE in the Carlingfords' house Nina and Kenneth were having a very busy time. They were seated together in the room which the boys called their 'den.' Malcolm, Fred, and Peach were otherwise employed. It was thought best that Kenneth and Nina should draw up the articles of war.

'I never thought it would come to this,' owned Nina; 'but now that I have begun, it is our bounden duty, Kenneth, to carry the thing through. Rosaleen must learn her lesson. She will never forget it. She will be thankful to me all the rest of her life.'

'I doubt it very much,' said Kenneth; 'but, as you say, Nina, it is begun, and we must go through with it.'

'Well,' replied Nina, 'let us get out the foolscap

paper. We have not too much time. You know I go to London in two days, and I want to establish the footing on which the Carlingfords and the Freres are to stand before I leave.'

'All right,' answered Ken. He took a sheet of paper, dipped a pen in ink, and looked up at his sister.

'You are very clever, Nina,' he said; 'and'——

'And you are bitterly ashamed of me,' cried Nina.

'I am a little ashamed,' returned Kenneth; 'but I won't say any more.'

'Don't,' she answered. She turned her face away for a moment. A brilliant and most lovely colouring was dyeing her cheeks; she had never looked more charming, never looked more gentle and womanly.

'And yet she is making two families thoroughly and truly wretched,' thought Kenneth. 'What a queer, queer girl she is! But of course we must stick by her. We would be the meanest of the mean if we didn't.'

'Now then,' exclaimed Nina, 'the first point to be considered is this: The father and the mothers of the Odds and the Evens must guess nothing. It will therefore be necessary to slightly modify the remark that the Carlingfords and the Freres are not to

speak to each other. If we carried out that idea to its extreme point our parents would guess that there was something wrong before many days were over; so, Ken, the first thing carefully to define is what we mean by not speaking.'

'Yes,' replied Kenneth. 'It strikes me that it is extremely puzzling.'

'I don't think so,' answered Nina. 'I think we can manage quite well. We speak, of course, as far as outward politeness goes. When a Carlingford meets a Frere, on either side "Good-morning" may be said; or if it is evening, "Good-evening;" but we are never to shake hands, nor touch one another in any way. If our parents on either side wish us to invite the other party to tea, we are to speak in the strict conventional tones of utter strangers; we are to talk about events of the day. It will quite do our politics good,' continued Nina; 'it will bring us up in history; it will give us general information.' Her eyes brightened. 'I never thought of that excellent point in connection with our battle,' she added.

'Oh, it's all fudge!' said Kenneth. 'I wish you would go on. We are not to speak, and we are to speak. I don't understand.'

'Put in the rules of the council of war,' said Nina—you can word it any way you like—"That we are

to speak as seldom as possible, and always on matters of outside interest. The Odds are never to be sorry for the Evens; the Odds are never to sympathise with the Evens; the Odds are never to be kind to the Evens; and just the same on the other side." We may meet when our parents require it. At school, those of us who are in the same school—and Peach, you know, is in the same form with Rosaleen and Amy—the same cold outward friendliness must exist; but that is all. I am going away, as you know, in two days. We will have copies of our rules, which can be added to as we find fresh ideas come to either side; and when I come back in the summer, if nothing has occurred in the meantime to soften the hard, hard heart of Rosaleen, we shall be obliged to have what I call an open battle. During the term, on both sides, we shall be extremely busy; but when the next holidays begin something further must be done to bring things to a decisive issue.'

'It is all very gloomy,' exclaimed Kenneth.

'I do wish, Ken, now that we have really started in it, you would take it up with some spirit,' remarked his sister.

'I can't, for I don't approve,' answered the lad; 'but of course I'll stick to you through thick and thin, Nina. But at present it puzzles me immensely.'

'So it seems,' she added. She then sat down herself, took up her pen, and began to write.

'You can copy this by-and-by, Ken; and you can go away now if you like.'

'Thanks,' he answered. He rose slowly.

Nina was left all alone in 'the den.' She looked around her and gave a quick sigh. She was so bright, such a cheery, pleasant, witty sort of girl, that she very seldom had moments to herself; and now a sense of weight seemed to steal over her spirit and bear it down a little closer to earth. She managed to shake it off, to persuade herself that she was doing a very wise and excellent thing; and then she rapidly drew up the rules of war. They were explicit and to the point. There were to be no compromises. Until the holidays the two families were to live in a truly neutral condition. They were only to meet when necessity obliged them to do so. They were to show no friendliness the one to the other, but to be cold and indifferent. At the same time, the Freres were not to speak evil of the Carlingfords, at least to their faces; nor were the Carlingfords to speak evil of the Freres. When the summer holidays came, more aggressive measures must be resorted to if the Dark Rosaleen had not by that time bent her proud knees and humbled her haughty spirit.

Book II.

SUMMER HOLIDAYS.

CHAPTER XI.

A STARTLING ARRANGEMENT.

NINA CARLINGFORD had a very good time with her aunt, Mrs Challoner. Mrs Challoner was sufficiently like her mother to cause the girl to regard her almost as a second parent; and so busy was her life, so many things did she learn, so many fresh people did she see, that the home-life and the great battle more or less faded from her view; at least they did not take the foremost place in the horizon of her thoughts.

The summer holidays were coming on, however —the holidays when she must go home and once more take the lead in her own family. It is true

that, notwithstanding all her busy life, she was now and then almost rudely brought back to the events which had occurred in the Easter holidays by letters from her brothers and sister. The letters were full—quite full—of the quarrel between the Carlingfords and the Freres. There was a mournful note in each epistle—a want, as Nina expressed it, of true spirit—which grieved her considerably. As far as she could make out, however, the children at home were keeping true to the articles of the council of war, and therefore she could not openly blame them.

She was in her aunt's, Mrs Challoner's, pretty drawing-room one evening about a week before the summer holidays, when a long letter from Kenneth was handed to her. There were one or two guests in the room, and Nina had been standing by the piano and helping to fill the chorus of some old English ballads. She turned now to take her letter. Mrs Challoner was not far off.

'You may as well read it, Nina,' she remarked. 'It is from Kenneth—is it not?'

'Yes,' she answered; 'but it can keep for the present, Aunt Julia.'

'Just as you please, dear,' replied Mrs Challoner.

Nina laid the letter on the nearest table, and went on with her singing. Presently the guests went away; Mrs Challoner bade her niece good-night,

told her to go quickly to bed, as she was looking somewhat pale from the great heat, and was leaving the room when she suddenly saw Kenneth's letter lying neglected on a little table.

'You are forgetting your letter, Nina,' she said. 'Are you not fond of your brothers and sister?'

'Fond of them?' cried Nina. 'I am just devoted to them. But you have been giving me such a right good time, Aunt Julia, that I have not thought of them every single minute. I was having a delightful evening when the letter came, and I thought I would put off reading it.'

'But why, dear? A letter from your brother cannot take from your pleasure.'

'Oh yes, but it can,' replied Nina.

'What do you mean by that, my dear child?'

'Well, the fact is,' answered Nina, 'I am bound in honour not to tell you what is the matter; but we are all in a sort of scrape at home.'

'You are all in a sort of scrape!' exclaimed Mrs Challoner. 'Now, what in the world do you mean?'

'It is true, auntie; and it is my fault. At least, I started it. I did what I did thinking it right, and I must go on with it now. Of course it is right; but it is a bother, all the same. The children, instead of being cheerful and gay, and writing me

such delightful letters as they do as a rule, have been nothing but discontented little mortals ever since I left them.'

'You can scarcely call your big brother Kenneth a little mortal,' replied Mrs Challoner. 'I am very proud of Kenneth, and think a great deal of him. I should like much to see him here. I intend to invite him to spend some of the Christmas holidays with me. You must stay, of course, while he is here.'

'Oh, that would be delightful!' exclaimed Nina, her eyes sparkling; 'and Ken has never been in London. It would be ever so jolly taking him round.'

'I think it would, dear. Well, we will regard that as fixed. By the way, you have not heard for a long time from those charming young people, your special friends, the Freres.'

Nina felt herself colouring. Her aunt watched her in some surprise.

'We don't write; that is a fact,' she said slowly.

'But you used to. You were always hearing from that quaint little girl Prudence Frere. You see I do not forget your friends' names; and when you were with me in Brussels, during the long holidays we spent together, you were always talking of them.'

'Well, we don't write; at least, we have not

lately,' replied Nina. 'I think I will say good-night now, Aunt Ju. I won't forget to take my letter with me.'

When Nina left the room Mrs Challoner sat for some time in deep thought. She had not made her inquiries without reason. She had received a long letter from her sister, not farther off than the afternoon of that same day; in that letter Mrs Carlingford had said:

'I am much puzzled by my young people just now. They won't confide in me, and I have always made it a rule not to press for their confidence; but there evidently is a cloud over them. What in the world can it be? It seems, as far as I can make out, to be associated with Nina. I wish you would get her to talk the matter over with you, Julia. Perhaps she might tell you, when she will not confide in her own mother. Do your best, for Kenneth is looking quite thin, and he said to me not an hour ago, "I really do not greatly care whether I get a prize or not at the examination." That is so unlike my dear, brave, manly boy that I feel certain there is mischief somewhere. The Freres, too, are not nearly so jolly as they used to be. You have heard, of course, of the extraordinary friendship between my family and the Frere children. I cannot make out what has come to them all; and when I

spoke to Peach she said, "Oh mother! don't ask me. The only one who can tell you is Nina, and I am sure she won't." So you see there is something up, and what it can be is the puzzle.'

Mrs Challoner now reflected over this letter, and said to herself, 'There is something up. I believe Nina has been up to some mischief. What in the world can it be?'

Mrs Challoner was a very good and a very sympathetic woman, but unfortunately she was possessed by a most inordinate and overweening bump of curiosity. She liked to ferret out secrets; and the idea that her pretty niece held one, which she would not tell her, annoyed her not a little. There was nothing to be done about it, however. Nina could be quite as obstinate as the good lady herself. Nothing would induce Nina to divulge what she chose to keep hidden; and Mrs Challoner had already discovered this marked trait in her niece's character.

'Well, well,' she thought to herself, 'the mother is worried, and the children are worried; and there is something up with the Freres, for Nina used to make me perfectly sickly the way she kept on talking about them—their virtues, their charms, their quaint names, the passionate friendship she had for Prudence in particular; and now she owns that they do not

write, and that she has not heard much about them. I know what it is. I like to have my finger in a pie of this sort, and I think I will ask Henrietta to invite me down to spend part of the holidays with her. I had meant to go to a German Spa; but never mind, I can do that for part of the time, and spend the rest of the time with the Carlingfords.'

Accordingly Mrs Challoner wrote to her sister to this effect:

'Keep a corner for me in your country arrangements. I cannot solve your mystery; but I am not myself if I don't do so in the long-run. I cannot quite say when I shall be with you; but sooner or later I shall put in an appearance, so don't forget.'

Meanwhile Nina, upstairs, had broken the envelope of Kenneth's letter and had spread the closely-written sheets before her. They ran as follows:

'MY DEAR NINA,—Here's a state of things. We have been as conscientious as two belligerent forces could be during your absence. The Odds and the Evens have kept faithfully to the terms of warfare; and I do not think we have exchanged a friendly word or bestowed a friendly glance one upon the other. But now, what do you think has happened? There is a large house in the country about forty miles from here, a great, huge barrack of a place;

and mother told me only to-day that she and Dr and Mrs Frere had taken it between them. So we are all, my dear Nina, to live in one house during the summer holidays. Now, what do you say to that? Ought not I immediately to confide in mother, and tell her that such a course of things is impossible? What is to be done? I can tell you that Malcolm and I and Fred and Peach are almost beside ourselves. In fact, we can scarcely conceal our feelings from mother; and it was only last night she asked me, "Is anything wrong, Kenneth? You don't look half the boy you were." Of course I could not tell her; but we are quite wretched. The warfare must come to an end. You must just give it up, Nina; it is really the height of silliness.'

Having finished reading her letter, Nina sat and thought for some time, then she took pen and ink, and wrote quickly in reply:

'MY DEAR KENNETH,—You must know me very little indeed when you write the sort of letter I have just received. As to giving up our quarrel because there are some difficulties in connection with it, it is the very last thing I should think of doing. We can manage beyond doubt to keep to the conditions of the warfare, even if we do live in the same house. For my part, I think it will be

extremely exciting, and will bring matters to an issue much more quickly than if we lived, as the families now do, at opposite corners of the square. I look forward with intense interest to the summer holidays; and the first thing I mean to do is to rouse your flagging spirit, and the flagging spirit of Malcolm and of Peach and of Fred. You 'll have to look out for storms when I come back to you, my boy; for I assure you until Rosaleen begs Fred's pardon I have not the slightest intention of hoisting the flag of peace.'

Nina laughed as she finished reading over what she had written.

'How silly they are!' she said to herself. 'It is full time for me to go back. I am glad that I shall be home in a week.'

She finished her letter to her brother, directed an envelope, and laid it beside her. She then wrote another and shorter letter to her mother:

'DEAREST, DARLING MUMSY,—In one week's time I shall be back again. How glad I shall be to see you, although I have had a very, very happy time with Aunt Ju, who is as like you, mumsy, as one pea is like another! But she is not, perhaps, quite, quite as nice, for she has never had any children of her own; but she is almost as nice, and I love staying with her, and look forward to being with

her again at the end of the summer holidays. But, mummy dear, what splendid news this is which Kenneth has given me!—the Freres and ourselves are all to live in a great big house together in the country. I am almost glad you have arranged to go to the country and not to the seaside. I hope there are plenty of trees about, and plenty of big lawns, and all kinds of fun, tennis-courts, and such things into the bargain. I am coming back in excellent health and spirits, and shall prove myself a very lively, noisy, troublesome daughter during the holidays; but never mind, mumsy, I am your own Nina, who loves you better than any one else in the world.'

Having finished the two letters, Nina stamped them and ran downstairs. She met the servant in the hall, told him to put the letters into the pillar-box, and, returning to her room, got into bed and fell fast asleep. She was not at all unhappy nor anxious. On the contrary, Kenneth's news had stimulated her to fresh exertions, and she looked forward to the summer holidays as to a very good time indeed.

In a week from the day when she had written her letters Nina went back to Warrencliffe. Kenneth, Malcolm, Peach, and Fred all met her at the station. They rushed forward when they saw her emerging from a first-class carriage. Peach uttered a little

whoop of delight, and, running to her sister, clasped her arms round her neck.

Nina gave her a hasty hug, shook hands with the boys, and even with Fred, who was greatly relieved that she did not offer to kiss him. They all got into a cab and drove home. The word Frere was not even mentioned; only once it nearly rose to the tip of Peach's tongue, but Nina put her arm round her, stooped down, and whispered:

'Not a syllable about the Freres to-night. I am home again, and we are to have a right good happy time.'

Peach uttered a sigh of intense relief, and whispered Nina's mandate to Fred, who looked equally relieved and cheered. He communicated the intelligence to Kenneth and Malcolm, and the whole little party were in consequence smiling and chatting as gaily as the members of one family ought when they reached the house.

'And how soon shall we go to the country?' asked Nina as she stood by her mother's side in the drawing-room.

'Well,' answered Mrs Carlingford, 'the Freres go down to-morrow. I thought that we might go with them; but Kenneth seems to think we had best make our jaunt on the following day. What do you say, darling?'

'I think so too. It is a great pity we cannot go down to-morrow, and the Freres the next day.'

'Well, dearest, as it happens, Dr Frere has arranged that he goes to-morrow, so we cannot disturb that now.'

'And what is the plan, mother?' inquired Nina. 'Are we to live higgledy-piggledy, all together, or are we to have separate halves of the house?'

'We have not absolutely decided that yet,' replied Mrs Carlingford; 'but, as far as I can tell, the arrangement is that, as the house is so very big, we occupy the great west wing and the Freres the great east wing, and that the middle or body of the house is neutral ground.'

'Very exciting indeed,' cried Nina. She paused and tapped her foot up and down.

'And what about our meals?' she asked.

'Oh, we dine and breakfast and lunch, and all that sort of thing, together,' said Mrs Carlingford. 'But we have our private sitting-rooms, of course; that must be, for Kenneth wants to study a good deal in the holidays. He hopes to take his London Matriculation, you know, early in October, and has to work very hard in order to pass.'

'By the way, mother,' exclaimed Nina, 'Aunt Julia has taken no end of a fancy to Kenneth, and she

wants him to go and spend part of the Christmas holidays with her and with me. I wonder if you would mind, mother?'

'I always like to have you all at home at Christmas,' replied Mrs Carlingford, a pathetic look coming into her face. 'You know that, darling. Ever since your dear father died I have felt'——

'Oh mummy! if you dislike it, of course we won't go,' said Nina. 'But I tell you what. Aunt Julia shall come and spend Christmas here; and when Christmas is quite over, Kenneth and I will go back to town with her for a week. How will that do, mummy?'

'By that time Kenneth may very likely be living in town,' replied Mrs Carlingford; 'but it all depends on whether he passes his "Matric." Well, dearest, I hear the clamour of Peach's fingers on the panel of the door; she wants you, as we all want you, my darling. Supper is ready. Come downstairs—won't you?'

The supper was as cheerful a meal as the Carlingfords had ever eaten. The Carlingford children felt the relief of Nina's presence; and Peach began to whisper to Fred that now things would be quite all right, and she was glad Nina had come to put a little spunk into them all.

'For we are softies, every one of us,' said Peach. 'We have not half the spirit the Freres have.'

'Oh, hush! hush!' cried Fred. 'If we say that name too loud Nina may be down upon us. I am rather afraid of Nina. Yes, I am.'

'I'll punch your head if you say that again,' answered Peach.

'You are always talking in that way to me. You quite forget that I am a boy,' said Fred.

'You are not a boy,' returned Peach; 'you're nothing in the world but a baby—a cry-baby, too. I often see you crying, and I know why.'

'Why?' asked Fred, in some alarm.

Supper was over then, and the children were standing in the deep embrasure of a big window. No one overheard their words.

'Why?' repeated the little boy again.

'Oh, I know,' said Peach nodding her head. 'It's 'cos you're fretting for Amy and her spelling. Now, aren't you?'

'Well, she is my half-twin,' answered Fred. 'It's no wonder I fret. She looks very bad, does Amy.'

'When did you see her?'

'I peeped over the wall yesterday, and she was walking about all by herself, and crooning out the very longest names you ever heard in the whole

course of your life. I very nearly said "Amy;" but I didn't, so you need not punch my head.'

'If I thought you had,' exclaimed Peach, 'I'd—— But there; Nina is home now, and it's all right—it's all right.'

CHAPTER XII.

PREPARATIONS.

HE Freres went down the next day to Inglenook, as the large old manor was called. They were all in high spirits, and, indeed, considerably excited. They felt that they had at least twenty-four hours before the arrival of their enemies, and they knew that in that time they had a great deal to do. Prue and Patience were quite friendly with Rose and Amy, and Rose and Amy felt the distinction of being so much with their elder sisters.

During the railway journey, and during the long drive in the open carriage, the sisters spoke often in whispers together, and the word Carlingford came more than once to their lips.

Dr and Mrs Frere had not noticed, as Mrs Carlingford had, the great coldness between their children and the Carlingfords. It was they who had

proposed this summer arrangement. Mrs Carlingford was Mrs Frere's greatest friend, and the latter looked forward with immense pleasure to spending many long weeks in her society. As they were turning in at the wide gates preparatory to driving down the avenue, she turned to Prudence and said:

'I am very sorry I did not see Nina; she arrived home last night. How she will enjoy this place! I was thinking, darling, that we could easily hire horses, and that you two and Nina Carlingford could have long rides together.'

'Oh, I should not care about it, really, mother,' said Prudence, colouring faintly as she spoke.

'Not care about it, Prudence! But you always have been so anxious to ride. Listen to her, father,' continued Mrs Frere, turning to her husband. 'This silly, naughty girl of ours says she would not care to ride.'

'But why not, Prue?' asked her father. 'You enjoyed your rides on the mountain ponies when we were in Wales last year.'

'Yes; but it is different now,' answered Prue. 'There is the sea two miles away, and these splendid grounds. I do not think—I mean,' she added, blushing and hesitating, 'I do not think I would greatly care about it.'

'Oh, we'll see!' exclaimed Dr Frere. 'Wait until

Nina comes. She'll soon put some spunk into you, little girl. I do hope, my child, you have not been studying too hard.'

'Oh no; I am absolutely quite well,' returned placid Prudence. She never did overwork herself, although she was a good girl, and made steady progress in her school studies. Patience was as like Prue as one sister can be like another. She was a sort of echo of Prue, and she now corroborated her sister's words, with a significant squeeze of the hand.

Presently the carriage drew up outside the porch of the big, roomy, delightful house, and Mrs Sweet, the housekeeper, who had charge of the place, and undertook to provide servants and all necessaries for the two families, came out into the porch curtsying and smiling.

'How do you do, ma'am? You're heartily welcome,' she exclaimed. 'How do you do, sir? Well, young ladies, I am truly pleased to see you.'

Mrs Sweet spoke as if she had known the family for a long time.

'Come in, young ladies — come in,' she said. 'Ma'am, I'll be pleased and proud to show you over the place. I took the liberty of having tea ready in the oak parlour; it's a very cool room, the sun never getting to it, as it faces due north.'

'We shall find tea most refreshing; and it is

very kind of you, Mrs Sweet,' replied Mrs Frere. She entered the house, the housekeeper following her, and the four little girls trooping behind. Finally Amy felt a touch on her arm; she looked round at Rose.

'I am not going with you now,' she said. 'I don't intend to. I am very thirsty, and I want my tea.'

'Bosh!' returned Rosaleen. 'There's a great deal to talk about. Who cares for tea?'

'Well, I want mine; and maybe there are cakes and fruit—there's sure to be fruit,' said Amy.

'Oh! fruit and cakes,' said Rosaleen in a thoughtful voice. 'I like them. I like everything here; and I like best of all that the Carlingfords are coming to-morrow.'

'But you'll be wretched when they come,' replied Amy. 'But there,' she added, 'we won't talk now. Do come; this is such a huge, big house that we'll lose ourselves if we are not quick.'

Meanwhile the others had entered the oak parlour, which was as charming and refreshing-looking a room as any tired travellers could desire. The windows were wide open, and round each window clustering roses peeped, as well as many other sorts of creepers. The sweet smell from a flowering myrtle greeted their nostrils, and in the garden outside there were great beds of cherry-pie, mignonette, sweet-peas, and

other sweet-smelling flowers. The scent of hay was also wafted in through those open windows. The oak parlour was worthy of its name, being lined throughout with heavy oak. There was a good deal of china fastened up to the walls, which relieved the dark effect; there were old books, too, and quaint old furniture, and a long glass which reached from ceiling to floor in the middle of one wall; and the old-fashioned latticed windows were curtained with the quaintest old-world muslin curtains. On the centre table a tea was laid which ought to have delighted the heart of the most fastidious child in the world. Late as it was in the season, there were still quantities of strawberries, and they were piled up in great glass dishes; and there were other fruits, and many jugs of cream, and junkets and cakes, and tea and coffee. And even Rosaleen forgot all about her desire to have a secret talk with Amy when she saw that tea-table.

'I am hungry and thirsty,' she said. 'I am very glad I came.'

'Well, so are we all hungry and thirsty, Rose,' replied her mother. 'Now run upstairs, dear, and wash your hands. Mrs Sweet will show you the bedrooms; and then you will come down. I shall be ready to pour out the tea. Afterwards we will walk round the grounds.'

The Freres had been allotted the west wing, which contained many bedrooms, all of which were as nice in their way as the oak parlour was in its way. The little girls had one between them, a cosy nest, with old-fashioned furniture and old-fashioned cot-beds. Amy quite screamed with delight when she saw hers; while as to Rose, she began turning somersaults up and down the oak floor.

'This is 'licious—'licious,' she cried. 'We could have a great fight here. There 's going to be a battle during the holidays, and we 'll fix the field; it will be as great a battle as those in history, and it may be mentioned in history by-and-by. I have it all settled. I am glad they are coming; yes, I am glad.'

'Well, get ready for tea now,' said Amy. 'We will have one night in peace, one delightful evening, one lovely morning. They 'll be here about this time to-morrow.'

'It 's all too long off,' cried Rose. 'I 'm eager for the fight to come hot and thick and fast.'

'You 're a little savage,' replied Amy; 'you ought to be ashamed of yourself.'

'Well, I 'm not,' answered Rosaleen. 'I 'm enjoying myself far too much to be 'shamed. You 're only 'shamed when you 're sad, and I 'm bubbling up with joy this minute. Oh, let 's be quick, Amy! What

matter whether your hair is smooth or not? You needn't stop to brush it, surely.'

'I 'll take out my little pocket-comb; that will do,' said Amy.

'You 're the most perfect old maid that ever walked the earth,' remarked Rosaleen. 'What do you keep a pocket-comb for?'

''Cos I like my hair smooth,' said Amy. 'I got it off a Christmas-tree last year. Isn't it an awfully sweet little thing?'

'Horrid little thing!' said Rose. 'You needn't think I 'm going to get out my tangles with it.'

Amy, who had produced from her pocket a little pocket-comb, with a tiny glass attached, now held up the glass before her face, managed to see about the half of one eye and a little corner of her nose, and proceeded, as she expressed it, to do her hair. Rosaleen danced round her while the process was going on, and begged of her to hurry. At last it was smooth enough to content the placid Amy, and she ran downstairs, accompanied by her sister.

Mrs Frere was seated at the head of the table. Dr Frere was lounging on a sofa by one of the open windows, and Prue and Patience had ensconced themselves on each side of him.

'There you are!' exclaimed the mother as the little

sisters entered. 'Rose, my pet, what an untidy head! Now, Amy's looks beautifully neat.'

'Oh! I wouldn't be a pocket-combed girl for all the world,' replied Rosaleen. 'It 's 'cos she 's an old maid that she has her hair so prim.'

'You are not to abuse Amy for her virtues, my dear,' called out her father. 'Now then, let us all enjoy the good things before us.'

That they did. Never was there a more delightful tea. In particular, Rosaleen's eyes danced and shone as she ate and ate and thought and thought. A great crisis was approaching, and she was eager for the fray.

At last the meal was over, and the children went out. Rosaleen rushed wildly down the lawn, followed by Amy. When they got to the bottom she pulled her companion down to her side.

'I 'm the queen of this fight,' she said. 'I 'm the general on our side of the battle. I want to speak to my soldiers, Prue and Patience; go and fetch 'em.'

'But they won't come. You don't suppose they 're going to be at the beck and call of a little girl like you?'

'Little girl yourself,' retorted Rosaleen, standing up before her sister, with her legs slightly apart and her arms akimbo. 'Go fetch 'em, and be quick.'

Her eyes flashed. 'We have no time to lose,' she said. 'We have to make out what we mean to do. We have a great deal to decide to-night. Go fetch 'em, Amy.'

Amy, as she remarked afterwards, felt almost mesmerised by Rosaleen's determined way, for there was not the gleam of a smile in her eyes, and her rosy face looked almost stern. Amy went slowly up the lawn. Presently she reached a little summer-house, where Prue and Patience were sitting with their mother.

'You 're to come,' said Amy, standing in front of the summer-house and gazing at her two sisters.

'Where?' asked Patty. 'What 's the matter?'

'Rosaleen wants you. She says you are to come.'

'Oh, nonsense! Tell her we 'll see her presently,' replied Prue. 'Yes, mummy; what were you saying? —that you'——

'But if little Rose wants you, you may as well go to her,' remarked the mother. 'I am going in to talk to your father. We must make a good many arrangements before the Carlingfords come. How very nice it will be to have them here!'

She got up as she spoke, and re-entered the house. The girls looked after her. Amy went solemnly into the summer-house.

'There 's going to be an awful lot of trouble!' she exclaimed. 'My heart quite sinks. Rose is getting worse and worse. I think when the Carlingfords do come down there ought to be a meeting, and it ought to be proposed that our father and the two mothers should be told about this fight, because, as for me, I 'm frightened. Rose has got so naughty and so fierce that there 's no holding her in.'

'She is pretty cool, I must say,' replied Patty. 'It is all most unpleasant,' she added. 'I quite feel for you, Amy; you have to be a great deal more with Rosaleen than the rest of us. She is an extremely naughty little girl, and has become very much worse since Nina went on in that ridiculous way. I must say Nina is most seriously to be blamed. I used to be very fond of her.'

'Oh! it is all wrong,' said Amy; 'and Fred is such a dear little boy, and I could have taught him such a lot of spelling these holidays; and we might have had a "spelling bee" in the end.'

'A "spelling bee"! If there is anything intolerable it 's that,' cried Prudence. 'Well, I suppose we must go and talk to the little termagant. Come, Patty.'

The three girls walked down the lawn. Rosaleen had seated herself on a grassy knoll. She had spread out her skirts and arranged her black hair; she had

taken off her hat, and was gazing straight before her.

'I must say that, though I am young, I have got plenty of spirit,' she said to herself; 'but I must let 'em feel that I have—that I am general, and they have got to obey me.'

The three girls approached.

'You can sit there, just in front of me,' said Rosaleen.

'Don't be so silly,' cried Prue, who could scarcely help laughing at Rosaleen's words.

'It isn't likely that the soldiers will sit beside the general,' replied Rose. 'You sit there on the grass; I chose this knoll 'cos I'm higher than you.'

'Well, let us humour her,' said Prue. She dropped down on the grass. 'Will this do, General Rosaleen Frere?' she asked.

'Yes, it will do very well indeed, Prue,' replied Rosaleen in a grave voice. 'Sit you down, Patience; and sit you down, Amélie.'

'Oh dear! this is very ceremonious,' exclaimed Prudence, laughing again.

'You shouldn't laugh at the general,' returned Rose. 'Now then, here we all are. It's very nice—isn't it?—to feel that the great battle is so near.'

'It's very awkward, I think,' answered Prudence; 'it's about the queerest confusion I ever heard of.

Poor dear mother, poor darling father, poor sweet Mrs Carlingford, how little they guess what is before them! But I tell you what it is, Rosaleen, whatever we do, we must not make our parents unhappy.'

'Of course not,' said Rosaleen. 'Mother would be awfully proud of me if she knew; she would say there never was a little girl with such a lot of spirit.'

'That's just it, Rose. I don't think she would be proud of you at all; she would think you were a very bad little girl, and she would be very angry both with you and Nina. Now, what I propose is, Miss Rose: let us have a meeting to-morrow, and let us'——

'Well,' cried Rosaleen, 'what's in your mind? Out with it.'

'Let's make it up,' answered Prue.

Rosaleen sprang to her feet.

'If you think I'm going to bend these knees you're fine and mistook. Give it up? If Nina comes to me and says, "Rosaleen, Dark Rosaleen, I beg your pardon. I see that you have that spirit within you which cannot be crushed. Dark Rosaleen, I beg your pardon, and I bend my knees to you," then there will be *Pax* if you like, and we'll all be jolly, and I'll be as pleased as Punch; and Amy

'If you think I'm going to bend these knees you're fine and mistook.'
PAGE 142

can teach Fred his spelling; and you, Prue, can hob-nob with Nina; and we can all be jolly together. But not for less than that; it's Nina's knees shall bend, not mine.'

'Oh! you're a little goose; there really is no talking to you. But come, of course we have declared war, and we must stick to it, although I must say it's detestable. But one thing we must do: we must be outwardly polite. We'll have to be with the Carlingfords more than ever we were during term, and we will have so to act that our parents are not unhappy.'

'Quite right, Prue,' said Patty; 'that's what we must do.'

'Then I propose,' continued Prudence, 'that when the Carlingfords come to-morrow we should just have a little talk with them for a minute or two, and arrange how matters are to be; there is nothing else for it.'

'There's one great comfort,' remarked Amy, 'we sleep in the west wing, and they sleep in the east wing; we'll have quiet nights anyway.'

'Maybe,' said Rosaleen, 'there'll be ambushes, and all that sort of thing, going on; there's no saying. You're in a great hurry to stop our fun; that's all I can say. For my part, I'm not going to yield. This battle has to go right through, and

I'm never going to yield. Nina shall bend the knee, not the Dark Rosaleen.'

The children continued their conversation a few minutes longer, and then Prue and Patty went sadly back to the house.

Meanwhile Mrs Frere, with the help of the housekeeper, had been making arrangements. The east wing, which was even more charming, if that were possible, than the west, was arranged for the use of the Carlingfords, and Prudence and Patty were asked by their mother to come with her to inspect the pretty rooms.

'I am anxious that you should see Nina's room,' said Mrs Frere. 'It is just over the porch. Did you ever see anything more fascinating?'

It certainly was a lovely room. From the window was a magnificent view, and the room itself was as sweet and pretty as the most fastidious maiden could desire.

'She cannot but be pleased with it,' said Mrs Frere; 'and there is a lovely window-seat where you, Prue, and Nina can chat together. My darlings,' she continued, 'I had a great friend myself when I was your age, and I appreciated what we used to call in Scotch phrase "a hearty haver." You can "haver" here, my darling child, to your heart's content.'

'Yes, mother,' replied Prue a little sadly; 'but

I do not think,' she added after a pause, 'that we shall "haver" much; we have grown'——

'Older, is it not?' said Mrs Frere. 'Yes, that is quite true. You and Patience are becoming very womanly, both of you but I don't want you to lose your sweet childhood too soon. You won't be fifteen for another week, and yours is the happy age, full of friendships and romance and sentiment and poetry and love. Keep all the good things of your golden youth, darlings.'

CHAPTER XIII.

PATIENCE LAUGHED.

THE next day the Carlingfords arrived. They came about the same hour that the Freres did on the previous afternoon, and walked in quite quietly, looking, all of them, quite nice and cheerful. Nina, in particular, was absolutely radiant in her summer dress, with a big shady hat softening her charming face.

Mrs Frere came out on the lawn to meet her friends, and she and Mrs Carlingford kissed each other very warmly, and then hand-in-hand went into the house. Dr Frere arrived presently and joined the two ladies. The children looked at one another. There was not a young Frere anywhere in sight.

'So far so good,' said Nina. She ran up to Mrs Frere as she uttered the words. 'Are we to see our rooms now, or later on?' she asked.

'Oh, of course, any moment you like, dear Nina. But where is Prue?'

'I can see my room without Prue—can I not?' asked Nina.

'Yes; but it is very odd that the child is not anywhere about. She and Patty were here a minute ago. As to the two little ones, they made off immediately after breakfast, and begged of me to allow them to take their lunch with them. I expect they are in one of the hay-fields. You would like to go and have a search for them, Peach; and you, Fred, might go with your sister.'

Fred's eyes sparkled. He would have given almost everything he possessed to rush off through that summer sunshine, through those hay-scented fields, in search of the two little sisters. He looked fixedly at Peach, who was standing up very grave and stern, her large gray eyes fixed on her sister Nina's face.

Nina gave her an emphatic look which seemed to the younger girl to signify approval; and then, turning once more to Mrs Frere, she said:

'I will run up and see my room. We shall come across Prue and Patty some time, I suppose.' She spoke quite lightly, and there was no apparent confusion in her tones.

Mrs Frere proposed to take the Carlingfords

over the east wing herself. She seemed annoyed at the absence of all the children, but said nothing further on the matter.

The Carlingfords were delighted with the pleasant arrangements made for their comfort. Nina lingered for a little in her pretty room, and Peach stood by her side.

'Oh Nina, Nina!' said the little girl when the door closed upon the elder ladies, 'how are we to carry it on?'

'By being perfectly natural and pleasant and polite, and thinking more of others than ourselves,' answered Nina in a most good, go-to-meeting sort of voice.

'But I don't understand you,' said Peach. 'I supposed that we were thinking altogether of ourselves in this matter. What do you mean?'

'I want us all to have a happy time. Of course the battle must go on until Rosaleen chooses to yield.'

'I do not believe she will ever yield,' replied Peach. 'It's not in her.'

'She must yield,' said Nina. 'The battle must go on until she does; but it is possible that I may bring her to her senses—I have several schemes in my head. But now, go downstairs, Peach. You look quite pale and almost frightened; that will never do.'

'I will run out and have a look round the place,' said Peach. 'If we see the Freres we will speak to them quite politely, of course.'

'Oh yes, dear; and in our parents' presence you must try to appear as good friends as ever. It will be a little difficult; but you have a lot of character, Peach, and I am sure you will do your utmost in this matter.'

'I would do anything for you,' replied Peach, kissing her elder sister, and then she ran out of the room.

Nina went to the window and looked out.

'It is rather puzzling,' she said to herself. 'I almost wish now I had never begun it. The situation will be a little strained; but I think we can carry things through all right, and of course in the end Rosaleen must yield. We must have a meeting of the Powers. Ken can act for me, and Prue for Rosaleen, and thus matters may be brought to an issue—I hope a peaceful one. I shall talk the thing out with Ken this evening. Oh, what a lovely place! How peaceful it seems! It is rather ludicrous that there should be war between us two families; but it shan't interfere with our happy time.'

She ran downstairs, resolved to banish all gloom.

The downstairs arrangements had been made also with a view to the comfort of the two families; the

whole of the centre of the house was given up to spacious sitting-rooms. Some of these sitting-rooms were for the mutual accommodation of the Odds and the Evens; but some, on the other hand, were for the Odds and some for the Evens alone. There was a delightful little boudoir which no one specially claimed, and which Nina begged she might be allowed to have for her own private use. This was allowed, and she began making arrangements immediately, carrying down from upstairs her favourite books, her work materials, her drawing portfolio, and other personal matters. She put out her favourite photographs on the mantelpiece, and, stepping through the open window, picked some mignonette and sweet-peas and heliotrope to fill the vases with. She was in raptures with her room, and had almost forgotten all about the quarrel when Peach came back.

'I can't find Fred anywhere,' Peach said. 'I have looked and looked, but he is nowhere to be found. What can have happened?'

'Oh, my dear Peach, this is a large house, and there are extensive grounds. Why should not Fred have run away all by himself?'

'Do you think Fred has gone to visit the Evens?' asked Peach in a low, awe-struck voice.

'Fred go to visit our enemies?' replied Nina. 'He would not be quite so mean. Don't be silly,

child. Ah! there is Ken. I want to talk to him.'

'And there is Malcolm. Perhaps he will let me walk about with him for a little,' said Peach. 'I declare I'm horrid lonely. I do wish'—— But she did not utter the words, for there had come a look of reproach into Nina's blue eyes which the little girl could never withstand.

Nina went up to Ken, linked her hand through his arm, and began to talk earnestly. He looked at her in some surprise, then nodded his head, and a pleased expression crossed his face.

'It would be the best thing possible,' he said. 'How soon will you propose it?'

'You must propose it,' answered Nina. 'You must go and have a talk with Prudence; she is the eldest on Rosaleen's side, and you are the eldest on my side. You can make any proposals you like; and the proposals are to be laid before Rosaleen and me, and we two are to decide. You may as well be quick about it, for things are rather strained; and, for my part, I should be glad to have peace in our camps.'

'Oh dear! oh dear!' said Ken; 'it is all the most ludicrous thing from first to last, and yet it has contrived to make us all seriously miserable.'

'I hope not,' replied Nina. 'Nothing can make me

seriously miserable in such air, in such a darling old place; and we have seven long weeks, Ken —oh, Ken! think of it—in this pure, exquisite, lovely country. Do you suppose a little girl like the Dark Rosaleen can cast a shadow over such a time?'

'It seems very like it,' said Kenneth; 'but I am glad I have got something to do. I'll go and have a search round for Prudence now.'

He went off at once, crossing the sunny lawn where the haymakers were tossing the hay, and entered another field on the farther side. Meanwhile Nina paced up and down. She was always a very hearty, merry girl; she was the ringleader in all sorts of fun and pleasure, and for a moment or two she could scarcely realise that, with a lot of children in the place, she was absolutely alone. She felt a little dreary; she could scarcely account for it. Presently her mother came out.

'Why, my dear Nina,' she said, 'where are the others?'

'Ken was with me just now; he has gone to look for Prudence,' replied Nina.

'Oh, indeed! It is very odd that none of the Freres have come to welcome you. I cannot understand it.'

'The children may have mistaken the time when

we were coming, mother. I will have a look for them myself.'

'Would you like me to come with you, darling?'

'Very much indeed, mummy. Let us go into the gardens first; I have not seen them yet. Never mind the Freres; we will have enough of them during the next seven weeks, in all conscience.'

Mrs Carlingford laid her hand on her tall daughter's arm, and they went in the direction of the large fruit and vegetable gardens, which, surrounded by their high brick walls, were to be found on the left of the mansion. They entered the first of these gardens by a small postern door. Everything was lovely, fascinating, delightful; and Nina forgot the Freres, and ran about looking at one luscious fruit-tree, or one rose-bush covered with blossom, after another. She gave little shouts of delight. Her mother followed her more slowly. At last they found themselves just in front of a small summer-house, and went in and sat down. Nina took her handkerchief to wipe the moisture from her heated forehead, and Mrs Carlingford glanced at her.

'Is anything the matter with you, darling?' she inquired.

'Matter? What do you mean, mother?'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Carlingford. 'I do not

exactly know what I think; I only wonder if we did wrong to come here.'

'But why, mother? It is such a lovely place, and'——

'That's just it, Nina. It is a lovely place; but lovely places, and beautiful houses, and exquisite grounds, and gardens like these do not bring happiness. I have noticed for some time'——

'What, mother?' said Nina in a low tone.

'That you and the Freres are not the friends you used to be.'

'Oh, we are very good friends, mother—very good.'

'Is that true, my darling?'

Nina paused for a moment. It was against the rules that the grown-ups should know anything of the quarrel between the Odds and the Evens; but suddenly it occurred to her that she might do well to confide in her mother a little way. She took her hand.

'Mummy,' she said.

'Yes, dearest.'

'There is something, but I hope it will soon be all over; and I want you not to speak of it, and not to notice it. Only, if we are not always gushing together, Prue and I, as we used to be in the old times, it is not that we do not love each other

just as much as ever. It may be wrong, mother, or it may be right; but the thing that is between the Freres and us must go on now until—oh! I cannot tell you how long, mother; only you must trust me, and you must take no notice, and you must not ask any questions.'

'I always have trusted you, Nina; and if you can assure me that there is nothing wrong at all in this, then'——

'I do not think there is anything wrong,' replied Nina very slowly. She looked thoughtful; a puzzled expression visited her eyes.

'I mean it for right,' she said more slowly; 'it may be wrong, but I mean it for right, and it must go on, mother, just for the present; and, please, please, take no notice.'

'You have trusted me, and I will take no notice,' answered Mrs Carlingford; 'but I shall be happier, much happier, when you tell me that the cloud, whatever it is, is removed. I wish, however, that you had given me even this small confidence earlier.'

'Why so, mother?'

'Because I should not have acceded to my dear friend Mrs Frere's request. I should not have come to the same house with the children if I had known what you have just told me.'

'It will be all right, mummy; it is, after all, the best thing possible. It will bring things to a crisis; that is all we want. Now do—do let us talk of something else.'

'Yes, I will, if you can assure me you are happy.'

'I am,' answered the girl. 'Let us talk about that time when Ken and I shall be in London with Aunt Julia.'

'By the way, Nina,' said her mother, 'your Aunt Julia wants to spend part of the holidays here.'

Nina frowned.

'You would like her to come, would you not, dearest?'

'Yes, and no,' she replied. 'Aunt Julia, you know, mummy, is rather quizzical and rather curious. I love her with all my heart; but she must not inquire too deeply into our ways. She must not come into our children's kingdom; that is what I mean, mummy. Even you, dearest darling, must not come in there; it is our own kingdom, and we must have it to ourselves.'

'Quite so. I can make an excuse not to have her,' replied Mrs Carlingford. 'I am glad you have spoken, Nina; and now, remember that I trust you to do right, not wrong—right, not wrong. That is the main thing.'

'I will try, mother,' answered the girl very gravely.

She and her mother chatted together for a little longer, and then went back to the house. Standing in the porch was Patience. The colour flew into her face when she saw Nina; she ran up to her. Nina ran to her too, and clasped her hand. They held each other's hands very tightly, but neither girl spoke. Mrs Carlingford watched them; the anxiety in her heart grew greater as she saw the peculiar way in which they met.

'Not a bit like children,' she said to herself. 'What is wrong? It is dreadful not to know, and yet I must trust my little girl.'

'Would you like to show me over the grounds?' asked Nina just at that moment in her pleasant voice. Something in the tone relieved Mrs Carlingford, who went and sat near Mrs Frere in the big hall.

The girls walked across the lawn side by side.

'It is so funny about the children,' said Mrs Frere. 'They have all been away; even tea has not brought them back. I cannot account for it.'

'Oh, Patience was here a moment ago,' answered Mrs Carlingford. 'She has just crossed the lawn with Nina.'

'Then that is right.'

Meanwhile the two girls were talking in low tones together.

'You have come, Nina,' said Patience. 'We are absolutely puzzled what to do. We thought it all so strange this morning that we resolved to go off by ourselves; but we cannot do that always; we must often meet; we must often talk.'

'Yes,' replied Nina, 'We can talk on ordinary matters; we must not talk on confidential matters. That is quite outside the rules of warfare.'

'Shall we have subjects, then, to talk on?' asked Patience, her eyes brightening. 'I don't mind a bit if I really know what to do.'

'When we walk together, as we must sometimes, we will discuss a special subject. We can talk about the beauties of Nature on the present occasion.'

Patience bit her lip, looked full at Nina, and then, all of a sudden—she did not know why—burst out laughing.

CHAPTER XIV.

SPONGE-CAKES.

EANWHILE the two little girls Rosaleen and Amy had gone off by themselves. They had gone away quite early that morning, having begged of cook to give them something to eat. She had put up a few cakes and a bottle of milk in a little basket; and, contented with this simple fare, they had run away by themselves. They had consulted no one as to their doings. At last they found themselves in a field which was on that warm summer day the perfection of all playgrounds. On one side it was sheltered by overhanging beech-trees; on the other side the sun shone and the grass looked a wonderfully vivid green. Rosaleen and Amy sat down under the shade of one of the trees. Amy took out her spelling-book, and began to amuse herself with her favourite occupation; Rosaleen lay full-length

on the grass, holding a story-book before her eyes. After a time Amy looked up and saw that her little companion was sound asleep. Rosaleen slept for over an hour; then she started up, rubbing her dark eyes and looking in some bewilderment about her.

'I've had a horrid dream,' she said.

'Oh, you're always having horrid dreams,' replied Amy; 'and I'm not a bit surprised. I have come to the conclusion that you are a very wicked little girl.'

'Oh, indeed!' answered Rosaleen. 'Well, I like being wicked—so there!'

Amy gazed at her in mild surprise.

'If you would but think of your education,' she said plaintively, 'all that you have got to learn; in particular, your spelling. Now, I wonder if you could spell "equilibrium."'

'I don't even know what it means,' answered Rosaleen; 'and, as to spelling it, I'm not going to try.'

'I can spell it most beautifully,' said Amy. 'Do you think you could spell "equestrian"—that's not so difficult—or "equivalent"? Do try and spell "equivalent." Begin "e-qui-"—now go on.'

'If you ask me another word I'll box your ears,' replied Rosaleen. 'If there is a thing under the sun I hate it's spelling. It's very *nasty* to spell well.

that's what I think—that is, if it makes a person turn into the sort of girl you are.'

'Oh, there, there!' said Amy; 'if we begin to quarrel amongst ourselves we shall have a sad time. I wonder,' she added plaintively, 'if the Carlingfords have come yet.'

'I don't know, and I don't care,' replied Rosaleen.

'I believe you do care very much,' answered Amy.

'Well, I don't. Let's have lunch; I'm very peckish.'

'You do use such queer words—peckish; it is so vulgar.'

'I'll say something worse if you correct me,' answered Rosaleen. 'Here, open the basket, and let's begin.'

Amy had thought a good deal about the lunch. She had considered to herself how she would make it last a long time, and how much fun she and her spirited little sister would extract out of it; but Rosaleen, for some reason, was not in the mood for any of Amy's ideas. She clutched at the basket, opened it rudely, took out a bag of sponge-cakes, and began to munch away.

'If we were at home,' she began, 'we'd have chicken and peas and new potatoes, and strawberries. I don't like nothing but sponge-cakes and milk.'

'You are cool,' answered Amy. 'It was your wish to come here, not mine.'

'I had to be away when *she* came,' said Rosaleen. 'You forget that I'm the general on the side of the Evens. I could not be by when the general of the Odds arrived.'

'Well, it's a great pity, that's all I can say.'

'I don't think so. I'm enjoying myself monstrous well,' said Rosaleen. 'You're always such a discontented thing.'

Amy began to whisper softly to herself a queerer word than she had yet thought of. 'Fissirostral,' she said. She began to spell it—'Fissi-;' then she looked at Rosaleen. 'Rosaleen,' she said, 'do you know what "fissirostral" means?'

'I don't want to know,' answered Rosaleen, munching another sponge-cake.

'Well, it's having a bill with a very wide gape; swallows have fissirostral bills. Isn't it lovely to know all about those things?'

'Hateful,' said Rosaleen; she sprang suddenly to her feet. 'I wonder if the Carlingfords have come?' she cried.

'Oh, are you curious?' said Amy. 'Do, do say that you are curious.'

'I'm not a bit curious,' answered Rosaleen, subsiding again.

'Well, I am. Would you mind awfully if I went to the gap in the hedge and looked through? I can just get a peep of the house, and I could tell if they had come.'

Rosaleen did not reply. She slightly turned her back on Amy, and began to investigate the contents of the basket. There were several kinds of cakes and a good supply of milk, but nothing more.

Amy, having satisfied herself as regards cake and milk, rose slowly, took Rosaleen's silence as permission, and ran across the field to the aforesaid gap. There she stood and peered through. After a time she came on tiptoe back to Rosaleen.

'They have come,' she said.

'Who have come?'

'The Odds.'

'Let them,' answered Rosaleen.

'They have all come,' continued Amy. 'They are wandering about; I saw Nina walking across the grass with her mother in the direction of the fruit garden, and—and do you know who is coming across the field towards us?'

'No, I'm sure I don't.'

'It's dear, dear little Fred.'

'Then let dear, dear little Fred keep away,' said Rosaleen. 'He's one of the enemies; he had better make himself scarce—that's all I know.'

Amy looked inquisitively at Rosaleen, and with a question in her eyes. She did not ask it, however. She stood quite still, a few feet from her little sister.

'Why don't you sit down and make yourself pleasant? Get at your spelling if you want to; don't stand just behind me.'

Amy cast longing eyes at her spelling-book. There were some delicious words, longer than she had yet come across, to be mastered. She felt that her knowledge of the orthography of the language was getting profound. She glanced again at Rosaleen. Rosaleen, having finished her lunch, lay down on the grass.

'I'm going to sleep,' she said. 'It's very dull in the country. I don't care a bit for the country. I don't think it pretty; I think it's ugly. Don't stand at my back, Amy; sit down or go away.'

After a further reflection Amy decided to do the latter. She went softly, very softly, almost on tiptoe, back to the gap in the hedge. At the other side of the gap she saw what somehow she had expected to see—the wistful, anxious, longing face of Fred Carlingford. Fred was as anxious to meet Amy as Amy was to meet him. His eyes shone with pleasure when he saw her.

'He would learn to spell "fissirostral,"' she said

to herself; 'he would learn all the long, long beautiful words. And he's such a nice boy, and he never quarrelled wi[illegible]s; it was all Nina's doing.'

'Fred!' said Amy in a sort of burst of irrepressible desire. 'Fred! Fred!'

'But I mustn't talk to you,' replied Fred.

'No one will know,' said Amy. 'Come inside the hedge, quick!'

'But I dare not,' answered Fred.

'Little coward!' said Amy. 'Who's to know?'

'No one,' replied Fred.

'Is anybody following you down the field?'

'Oh no, no!'

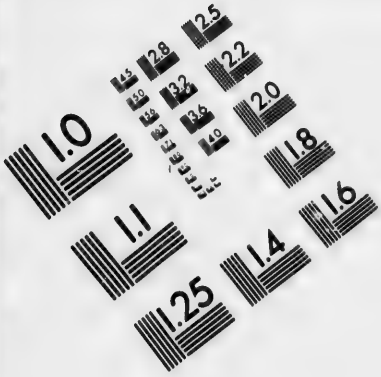
'Then come quick. Here's a lovely, lovely place; it's behind this holly-bush. Come quick!'

In an instant Amy, a stronger character than Fred, had seized his all-too-willing hand, had dragged him across the field, and they were both seated at the farther side of the holly-bush.

'Can you spell "fissirostral"?' asked Amy at once.

'No,' answered Fred. His heart was beating; he put up his hand to his forehead to wipe away the moisture.

'I cannot spell anything,' he said. 'I seem to grow stupider and stupider. You could teach me a lot; but, of course, you can't.'



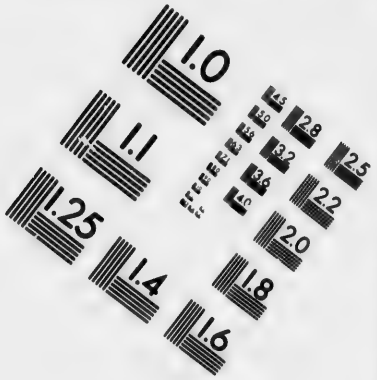
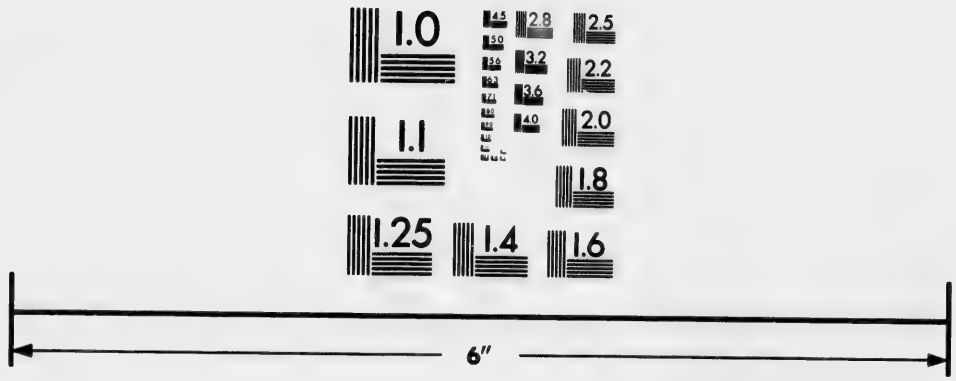
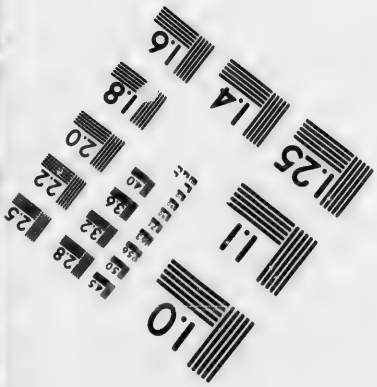
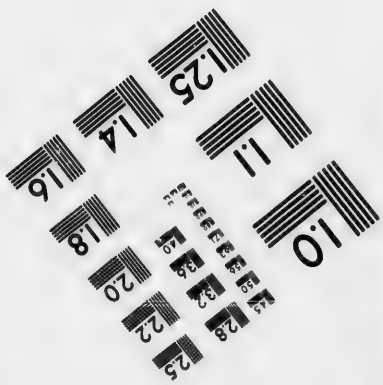


IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (MT-3)







Photographic Sciences Corporation

23 WEST MAIN STREET
WEBSTER, N.Y. 14580
(716) 872-4503

'Oh, but I could,' said Amy; 'and I—I love to.'

'But you must not, you dare not. Oh, what would Rosaleen say if she saw me?'

'And what would Nina say if she saw me? But we're both in the same boat, Fred; and it often happens in real warfare.'

'What? What?' asked the child.

'A member of the enemy's camp meets another member of the other camp, and they—they are real friends in their hearts. You are my friend in your heart—aren't you, Fred?'

'Of course,' answered Fred; 'and I don't want this horrid quarrel.'

'And yet it is all about you,' said Amy.

'Oh, bother!' replied Fred.

'Well, I think it's bother too,' continued Amy. 'We could have such a lovely, lovely time in the country now. We enjoy it like anything; only, Nina says no, and the Dark Rosaleen says no, and we are thoroughly wretched. Look here, Fred, it can't be wrong; I know it can't.'

'What?' said Fred.

'Suppose,' said Amy, bending close to him, 'we meet every morning early, before anybody is up. There's a lovely pear-tree just outside Rosaleen's and my window; and Rosaleen sleeps sounder than any top, and I always wake early in the morning;

and I'll get out of my window—I'll slip down by the pear-tree. And if you'll do the same by your window—I know there's something you can cling on to—we could meet, and we could go away by ourselves and do our spelling.'

'Is it to be only spelling?' asked Fred in a rather dubious voice.

'Oh, I thought,' exclaimed Amy, 'that you wanted to learn; you don't even know what "fissirostral" means.'

'It sounds horrid,' replied Fred. 'I don't want to know.'

'But at least you would like to be able to spell it. Suppose you were going in for a competitive examination, and the examiner asked you to spell "fissirostral," and you didn't know, how would you feel then?'

'I 'spect I'd be ploughed,' answered Fred.

'There now; you wouldn't like to be ploughed—would you?'

'No,' said Fred.

'Well, then, I'll teach you how to spell that word, and many, many others; and I'll help you with your history. We'll be as improving to each other as ever we can.'

'But how can I improve you?' asked Fred.

Amy thought for a moment.

'You might tell me how you manage that horrid football,' she said. 'I'm not interested in games, but you are.'

'Oh, I'll tell you all about it,' answered Fred, his dark eyes sparkling. 'What place shall we meet at? But won't it be awfully mean?' he added.

'I don't think so. Oh, good gracious! there's Dark Rosaleen; she's moving about. If we are seen we are lost. Creep in under the holly-bush, Fred—quick, quick, quick!'

Fred, quite as frightened as Amy, struggled in under the holly-bush, pulling his legs after him. He was much scratched, and his legs began to bleed. Amy lay down on the ground underneath the large bush, and Fred curled himself up as well as he could.

'She won't find us here,' gasped Amy. 'Don't speak a word for your life.'

'It's you that are speaking,' replied Fred. 'Oh! I am torn and bleeding. I'm in dreadful agony. I think I'm bleeding to death.'

'Not you,' answered Amy. 'Think of "fissirostral," and stay quiet.'

Fred felt that he hated 'Fissirostral,' whoever he was; he really supposed that the word belonged to some unknown man.

Rosaleen walked about, calling her sister. Pre-

sently, hearing no response, she sat down; and Amy, after a long time, drew herself from under the shelter of the holly-tree, and desired Fred to do likewise, and told him not to mind his wounds.

'They will heal in no time,' she remarked. 'Every boy in the country gets scratched; it's nothing.'

'It hurts a good lot, though, all the same,' said Fred.

'Well, I won't have you for my half-twin if you grumble about things like that,' replied Amy. 'Now go back through the gap in the hedge, and no one will know.'

'And are we to meet to-morrow morning?' asked the little boy.

'Of course we are. Now then, off with you.'

Fred scampered away; and Amy, after a judicious time had elapsed, went to her little sister.

'Where have you been?' asked Rosaleen.

'Oh, wandering about,' said Amy. 'It's very dull. I wish this quarrel would come to an end.'

'It's no good your wishing,' replied Rosaleen. 'My knees are stiffer than ever.'

'Bother you and your knees,' said Amy. 'We had best go back now, and have a proper tea;' and Rosaleen, by no means unwilling, and thoroughly hungry—for the cakes and milk had not satisfied a very voracious appetite—rose to comply.

As the little sisters were crossing the field they met Prudence and Kenneth walking together side by side and talking earnestly.

'Why,' exclaimed Rosaleen, 'what does this mean?'

Kenneth no sooner saw Rosaleen than he drew up, and motioned to Prudence to do the same.

'I am glad we have met you, Rosaleen,' he said. 'We want to say something.'

'What?' asked Rosaleen. She tried to stand on her dignity, but it was rather difficult to do so with tall Kenneth looking at her with slightly quizzical eyes.

'Do you know what a truce means?' he asked.

'No; I am sure I don't,' answered Rosaleen.

'Well, it's a warlike term; you know we are at war, we Odds against you Evens. We want to have a truce or an armistice.'

'Oh, I am sure I don't know what you are talking about,' said Rosaleen.

'Spell it,' whispered Amy to her sister.

'I won't,' cried Rosaleen. 'If you ask me to spell another word I'll box your ears.'

Amy spelt it over softly to herself.

'I wonder if there is an "s" or a "c" in the last syllable,' she said. She looked full up at Kenneth.

'What is it?' asked Kenneth.

'Is there an "s" or a "c" in the last syllable of armistice?'

'A "c" of course,' replied Kenneth; 'but don't interrupt me now, Amy. We want to have an armistice or truce. That means that for a time—for a short time, we'll say for twenty-four hours—we cease all hostilities; we become friends as it were; we talk to one another; there is no trouble. During that time Prudence and I and one other member on each side meet and consult what is to be done to bring the great quarrel to an end. We want the truce to begin, if possible, to-morrow morning, and we wish to know, Rosaleen, if you are agreeable.'

'Oh, I'm quite agreeable,' answered Rosaleen; 'only you need not think that I'll be friendly, for I'm bitter cut through my very heart; and whether there are twenty armistices or not, I'll never, never yield. That's all. You can have your truce or armistice or whatever you call it, only don't suppose that I'm going to yield.'

'We'll see about that,' said Kenneth, 'and we'll begin the truce to-morrow morning. To-morrow the Odds and the Evens can be quite as friendly and as much together as if there were no battle between us.'

'It must end on the following morning,' remarked

Rosaleen. 'It is only for twenty-four hours, and I—well, I think I'll go away for the day.'

'Oh, don't talk nonsense,' said Kenneth. 'You'll be right glad to talk to Fred, you know, and to Peach. Let's have one happy day, whatever comes after.'

And Rosaleen, her dark eyes lighting as if she felt a sudden drawing towards those to whom she was an enemy, relented without any further demur.

CHAPTER XV.

JACK-IN-THE-BOX.

IT was finally agreed, notwithstanding the Dark Rosaleen's wishes, that the armistice was to last for three whole days. During that time the Odds and the Evens were to associate as much as ever they cared the one with the other. They were to be as free and frank and jolly as if there were no awful war between them; but on the subject of the war they were not to speak. They were in honour bound to leave that alone. Only those who were arranging the terms of the future warfare were allowed to discuss the subject. The two who were finally selected for this important post were Kenneth on the side of the Odds, and Prudence on the side of the Evens. They were both very much about the same age, and had each of them a strong, determined, reliable sort of character.

They were neither of them given to mere impulse, but could act on occasions with coolness and common-sense. Rosaleen and Nina were, of course, to be consulted; but it was these two who were to draw up the terms of the future warfare or the possible peace.

Meanwhile the rest of the children were thoroughly happy—that is, all but Rosaleen. Rosaleen, however, had many misgivings in her somewhat stormy little heart. She did not like the aspect of things. The armistice was by no means to her taste.

'Either let 's be on or off,' thought resolute Rosaleen. 'Let 's hate with all our hearts or love with all our hearts. I don't mind which, but I hate being betwixt. I 'm a betwixt now, and I hate it.' So she would not be very friendly with Fred; and she was decidedly snappy and disagreeable to Peach, who, glad enough to be once again with children of her own age, had hailed the short days of the armistice with rejoicing.

The parents were much delighted to see the young folks chumming together, chatting together, going off in couples together; an Odd linked to an Even; a Carlingford with his arm thrown round a Frere's waist. It was all right; there was nothing in Mrs Carlingford's fears; they had vanished like so much smoke. She sat down and wrote to her sister, and

told her that she would be very glad of the proposed visit, but that her qualms with regard to the well-being of the children had completely vanished.

'Mothers are apt to be fanciful,' she wrote; 'and I own that I was. There was nothing in my fears—no ground for them; the children are very affectionate and very happy together. Nina is, of course, the life of the party; but Rosaleen is also a dear little thing, with a great deal of character. She is less friendly, however, than the others; but still, everything is all right.'

Thus wrote Mrs Carlingford, little knowing all that was soon to come to pass.

On the second day, which was elected to be the occasion of a great picnic to some woods about ten miles off, Rosaleen awoke very early. As a rule she slept well—exceedingly well; but on this occasion she found, as she expressed it, that she could not keep her lids down.

'They spring up like a Jack-in-the-box whenever I shut them,' thought Rosaleen. 'It's very tiresome; I never knew lids so hard to manage before.' She made a valiant effort once again to let her dark, thick lashes lie on her rosy cheeks, but in vain. 'There they go,' she thought; 'Jack-in-the-boxes worse than ever. I wonder if they have got springs inside, to be so extra wide-awaky. What a nuisance it is

to have lids with springs to 'em! There is Amy; she's asleep. No thought of her spelling now. I declare I won't stay in bed any longer. It's a beautiful, fine morning; I'll get up.'

She rose, put her small brown toes on the floor, and looked around her. She was dark herself, as if she were really born a little gipsy; and perhaps the wild blood in her which she had inherited from some distant Irish ancestors helped to make her the extraordinary little creature she was. She felt akin to the gipsies; she had a great longing to be near them. She never saw a gipsy woman pass but her whole heart went out to her. Now she thought and thought.

'I wonder if there are any near,' she said to herself. 'If there are, I'd like to visit them. It would do no harm; there may come a time when they will want me to be their queen. Anyhow, I think I'll go and pay 'em a visit; there must be some somewhere near.'

To think, with Rosaleen, was almost always to act. She accordingly dressed very quickly.

'It will be a comfort,' she said to herself, as she got her little red cloak out of the wardrobe—'it will be a comfort when all this fuss is over, and we are fighting as hard as we can again. They won't get terms out of me, so they needn't think it. There

are two more days of this horrid truce. I think I'll spend the morning with the gipsies.'

Rosaleen approached the window. She had slipped her red cloak over her little shoulders, not because she needed it, for the day was a very warm one, but because she thought it gave her a picturesque appearance, and made her look almost as if she belonged to this wandering race. She opened the window softly. It was perfectly easy for her to climb down by the pear-tree. Up to the present Amy had not thought it necessary to keep her appointment with Fred. During the armistice they might meet as much as they liked without any one remarking them. When the armistice was over they might use the pear-tree; but it so happened that Fred himself did not clearly understand this. He had something he wanted very badly to confide to Amy; and as Rosaleen now softly alighted on the turf, the first person she saw was Fred. His brown eyes, not nearly as dark as hers, dilated with a kind of horror when he saw her.

'So you are here?' said the young lady. She shook out her crumpled frock, arranged her red cloak round her shoulders, and stared straight at Fred.

'Is my hair fine and messy?' she asked.

'Yes,' replied Fred; 'it's in an awful tangle.'

'That's right,' said Rosaleen; 'that's how I like

it to be. And what are you doing here? Spying around?'

'No, I'm not spying round,' answered Fred, getting very red. 'We're having an armistice now.'

'Oh, call it a truce,' said Rosaleen. 'That other word was made for Amy, and I hate Amy's words. I would like to scratch 'em all out of the dictionary. I would have the dictionary very simple, all words of one syllable. Amy would die then; yes, she would, and I would watch her as she was fading off. Oh! it's terrible the way Amy bothers one with spelling.'

'Well, she does, rather,' agreed Fred, who did not like to speak against Amy, and yet in his heart of hearts hated her spelling craze.

'And what are you doing here?' said Rosaleen. 'It's a great deal too early for little boys to be up. Go back to your bed.'

'Go back to your own bed,' replied Fred, with some spirit. 'You're nearly as young as me.'

'I'm not; I'm a year older,' said Rosaleen; 'and then I'm a girl. Girls grow up twice as fast as boys. Girls are like mushrooms; they grow up in one night, as it were. You're nothing but a boy. You're a slow-coach—that's what you are.'

'It's very mean of you to call me names while the armistice is on,' cried Fred.

'If you don't call it truce,' said Rosaleen, doubling her fists, 'I 'll—I 'll '——

'Oh, well—truce,' replied the little boy, in some alarm.

'That 's all right,' said Rosaleen; 'you can stay under this tree as long as you like. Amy is fast asleep, if you 're thinking of her. She 's not going to be bothered with you at this hour.'

'But where are you going?' asked Fred.

'I 'm not going to tell you,' replied Rosaleen.

'But, oh! Rose, Rose, may I not come with you? It 's so precious dull here. I got up so very, very early. I do love you so much, Rose; I think you are just most beautiful.'

'Look here,' said Rosaleen, her eyes flashing, 'do you mean that you really, really love me?'

'Oh! indeed I do; better than Amy almost.'

If there was one thing Rosaleen coveted in her heart of hearts it was to be loved. She looked straight at Fred.

'You 're rather nice for a boy,' she said. 'I mean you are not bad. No one could compare a boy with a girl; but for a boy you 're not bad.'

'Thank you,' replied Fred humbly.

'And you really love me?'

'Yes.'

'Look hard into my eyes and say it again.'

Fred did look very hard into the glowing dark eyes of Rosaleen.

'I love you,' he repeated with fervour.

'I wonder how much?' said Rosaleen.

'How much?' echoed Fred.

'Yes.'

'Try me,' said Fred.

'Would you do anything I asked you?'

'Anything,' answered Fred the rash.

'Well, then, will you leave the Odds and come and join us, the Evens?'

'What do you mean? That I am to turn traitor?'

'That 's about it. You can pretend to belong to them, but you must belong to us all the time—you must belong to me.'

'Oh, but I—that means that I am to be false to Nina and to'——

'Of course it does. If you love me, what does that matter? And I will take you with me this morning. I am going to visit the gipsies. The Gipsy Queen expects me, I think. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she was getting my breakfast ready. Wouldn't you like to come with me?'

'Oh, awfully—awfully!' said Fred.

'If you do what I wish, you are to be a traitor in the camp; you are to belong really to us. You are to come here every day and tell me what they

are doing. Do you think that this truce, as they call it, will clear up matters? Not a bit of it; not as long as the Dark Rosaleen lives, who won't bend her knees. Will you belong to us? We'll have the victory in the end; and when the victory is won, and that proud, silly, ridiculous Nina of yours has bowed her knee, then I'll make you captain of my army, and—oh! you shall have no end of honours. Will you come?'

It was very dreadful—very dreadful indeed; but Fred's heart ached to accept the proposal.

'I ought to think about it—ought I not?' he said.

'No, you oughtn't; you ought just to say here this minute, "Dark Rosaleen, I belong to you." You know it was on account of you that the quarrel began; and it would be splendid to win you over, to have you on our side all the time, to have you thinking all the time, "Rosaleen did quite right that night; it was very good for me to be punished as I was, and Rosaleen would have been very bad if she had told." It would be lovely—lovely; it would be a magnificent triumph for me. Will you promise? You must be quick. I have no time to lose; the Gipsy Queen is getting my breakfast ready. I expect she's boiling coffee now. I like my coffee hot and strong, and with plenty of milk, and she

is getting it all ready; and the Gipsy King is getting out my throne; and maybe there's a little throne getting ready for you, and you can sit near me.'

'There are gipsies about two miles from here,' said Fred.

'Oh, do be quick!' cried Rosaleen, jumping up and down. 'We'll go there, you and I, hand-in-hand, and we'll have such a jolly time. Oh! do say "yes;" be quick. You belong to me.'

'But it does seem so mean,' said Fred.

'I call it jolly plucky. But, mean or not, I want you; and if you don't come I'll'——

But what Rosaleen did mean to do Fred never knew, for at that moment there came a rustling sound in the direction of a distant part of the house; and Rosaleen, catching her little companion's hand, dragged him quickly into the shrubbery.

'Now,' she said, 'you have got to say "yes" or "no." If it's "yes"'——

'Oh, yes, yes!' replied Fred; 'it's so mis'rable as it is. I have no fun at all; and Peach, who ought to be fond of me, seeing I am her own twin, never looks at me, and is so scornful.'

'You won't be dull when you belong to us; it will be wonderfully exciting. You'll be of great use,' said Rosaleen.

'Well, then, all right,' agreed Fred. 'I'll belong to you. I do love you and Amy tremendous.'

'You must love me much better than Amy. Amy is all very well—a good sort of little spelling-girl; but I am queen, and I am general. I am at the top of everything; and the victory will be mine in this warfare, and you'll be my captain when everything is won. Now, drop on one knee and say, "Liege lady, I belong to you." There, go down; drop on one knee.'

Fred did so. He raised his eyes; Rosaleen graciously gave him her hand.

'Rise, Frederick,' she said. 'I am pleased to accept you as a member of my army.'

This ceremony being completed, Fred—with an extraordinary added load on his mind, although he had expected it to be as light as a feather—accompanied Rosaleen across the fields in the direction of the gipsies' camp.

'Why do you love gipsies so much?' he asked.

''Cos I belong to them. Do you know what I think?' Rosaleen stooped towards her little companion—she was half a head taller—and said in an emphatic voice, 'I think I was stole from the gipsies when I was a little, wee, wee baby. I believe I am a gipsy, and that I am Queen of the Gipsies; that's what I think. Never mind; I love 'em, and I want

to see 'em. Are you quite sure there are gipsies here?'

'Of course there are,' said Fred. 'We took a drive yesterday evening, and we passed all their tents. There were three or four vans and a lot of tents, and a lot of children playing about in the fields, and as brown as berries.'

'As brown as me?' asked Rosaleen.

'Yes,' replied Fred; 'only not half so handsome.'

'You're a very nice little boy, Frederick,' said Rosaleen in an emphatic voice. She patted him condescendingly on his shoulder. 'I am going to make great use of you, Fred,' she added.

'Thank you, Rosaleen.'

'You'll never be lonely again; you'll have an awful lot to do.'

'Only, I hope,' said Fred in a shaking voice, 'that Ken and Malcolm and Nina will never find out.'

'Let 'em find out if they like; what does it matter?'

'Oh! and Peach; it would kill Peach,' continued Fred.

'Let her die,' said Rosaleen.

'But I don't want her to die.'

'You needn't talk about these others to me; I hate every one of 'em. You're the only one I care for, and I'm very fond of you; you're not at all bad

for a boy. But, I say, let's hurry now; let's run, Fred, to the gipsies.'

'Suppose they have dogs,' said Fred.

'Dogs!' echoed Rosaleen; 'as if I feared dogs. Come along; don't be a coward, Frederick. I'll throw you over if you are. There, I'm your liege lady, and you have got to do anything I tell you, even if it is to die.'

Fred already began to feel the silken chains which Rosaleen had flung over him. He was more and more enamoured of her bewitching little presence and bold and daring ways; but already his heart was aching, aching, as it would ache worse and worse for many months to come.

The gipsy encampment was in a field just outside some woods, which were called the Plantagenet Woods. There were three big tents and two smaller ones; and there were two great van-loads of basket-work of all sorts and descriptions, neatly packed after gipsy fashion, at one side of the field. It was not yet more than seven o'clock in the morning, but the gipsies were up and busy.

Rosaleen, running with all her might and main, her cheeks rosy, her eyes sparkling, now entered their little settlement. There was a gap in the hedge, through which she pushed. Two or three dogs immediately rushed towards her. They barked and yelped,

and sprang upon the child. She pushed them aside indignantly.

'Go down,' she cried. 'I 'm not afraid of you.'

Then one of them caught her little red cloak; and when this happened, a big gipsy woman, as dark as Rosaleen, but very ugly, and about sixty years of age, came out of her tent.

'Let go this minute, Pincher,' she said to the brute. He dropped the cloak, and with his tail between his legs turned towards the woman.

Fred meanwhile was hiding in abject terror behind the hedge. Rosaleen paused and looked round towards him.

'Come on, Frederick,' she called out.

On hearing her voice, Fred, very much frightened and with his face like a sheet, did advance to the other side of the hedge. The dog Pincher began to growl, and prepared to spring upon him, whereupon he uttered a piercing shriek, and rushing up to Rosaleen, hid behind her.

'Oh! do call your dog off,' said Rosaleen. 'This little boy is a bit of a coward. There now, that 's better.—Do be quiet, Fred; don't make a little goose of yourself.'

Fred, thus adjured, tried to regain his fast-vanishing courage. Rosaleen turned and faced the woman.

'What 's your name, please?' she asked.

'My name, dear?' replied this personage, looking all over the radiant and handsome little girl. 'My name is Hepsibah Lee.'

'Hepsibah Lee!' repeated Rosaleen; 'that 's a very fine name.'

'So it is. And what might your name be?'

'The Dark Rosaleen,' replied Rosaleen. 'I 'm not quite sure whether I am an English girl, or an Irish girl, or a gipsy girl, or a fairy.'

'To be sure, how queer she speaks, the little missy!' said Hepsibah Lee. 'Well, dear, you look to me very much as if you might be a gipsy girl.'

'That 's what I think,' agreed Rosaleen. She pulled off her hat and shook out her black hair.

'It 's not dyed, you know,' she remarked; 'it 's natural, and so is the skin. It 's dark—isn't it?'

'Very dark, dear, and very beautiful,' said Hepsibah Lee.

'I wonder,' exclaimed Rosaleen, her eyes sparkling, 'if you would mind showing me round. I 'm awfully fond of gipsies; I love 'em and dream of 'em, and that 's why I think I must in a sort of way belong to 'em. Are you getting my breakfast ready? and have you set a throne for me quite handy?'

'To be sure, love, you shall have a nice breakfast

and so shall this dear little gentleman. He is not a gipsy by birth, though—is he, dear?'

'Oh no,' said Rosaleen, in disdain. 'He's nothing but a poor little English boy.'

'Poor, indeed!' echoed Fred, with anger.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITH THE GIPSIES.

HEPSIBAH LEE was most attentive to the Dark Rosaleen. She showed her all over the gipsy encampment; she took her from one tent to another, and allowed her to peep in. The tents were by no means destitute of comfort; and one of them, in which the Gipsy Queen, a certain Floribel Jones, resided, was even picturesque. There was a carpet on the floor, and one or two well-stuffed chairs, and the bed on a proper bedstead, and a looking-glass hanging up against the tent-wall, and a basin and jug and washhand-stand—in fact, the usual requirements of a thoroughly comfortable room.

Rosaleen noted these things with intense admiration; but the creature to whom her whole heart went out was Floribel Jones herself.

Floribel Jones was about twenty years of age.

She had very dark flashing eyes, black hair, a low brow, and the usual gipsy features. She was tall and slender, and very graceful. She wore a crimson dress, cut rather low in the neck; and she had a great many coloured beads round her swarthy but beautifully-formed throat, and on her arms she wore innumerable bangles. This personage came out with immense interest to see Rosaleen; and Rosaleen caught hold of her hand and looked at the bangles, and then raised the hand to her lips and suddenly kissed it.

'You are Queen now,' she said; 'it will be my turn some day.'

While Rosaleen was talking to Floribel, Hepsibah Lee went aside and spoke a few words to a gruff-looking man, who came out of another tent smoking a short pipe. He listened attentively to what she said, nodded his head, and walked off in the opposite direction right out of the field.

Fred watched all this with a sort of terror. Rosaleen was so busy talking to Floribel that she had not observed that Hepsibah had left her; but Fred, who had read terrible tales of gipsies, and the awful way in which they stole English children, was quite certain now that these gipsies meant to steal Rosaleen and himself. Oh, how bitterly he regretted that he had left his own side and gone

hair, a low
She was
he wore a
k; and she
er swarthy
r arms she
nage came
leen; and
looked at
o her lips

ill be my

Hepsibah
a gruff-
smoking
what she
he oppo-

terror
that she
er; but
and the
children,
eant to
erly he
d gone

Rosaleen caught hold of her hand and looked at the bangles.

PAGE 190

over to Rosaleen! After all, Rosaleen, although fascinating, was a very terrible little girl. He wondered if she were right, and if she really was not a girl at all but a fairy or sprite, as she called herself. She certainly seemed to have the ways of one. He watched her now as she spoke to Floribel, and laughed and showed her white teeth, and asked eager questions. But for the presence of Pincher, who was prowling round evidently prepared to spring on the English children if they gave him the smallest provocation, it is sad to relate that Fred would have turned and fled. As it was, he had to hold his ground; but he longed beyond words for the moment when Rosaleen would think it time to return home.

Presently, unable to bear his impatience any longer, and seeing a lot of little gipsy children coming out of their various tents, rubbing their eyes and approaching close to where he stood, he pulled Rosaleen by the arm.

'Well, what is it now, Frederick?' said Rosaleen, turning and giving him a quick, impatient glance.

'Isn't it time to be going back?' whispered Fred. 'I really do think it is.'

'It's not half-past seven o'clock yet,' whispered Rosaleen. 'I'm not thinking of going back at present.' She turned again to the Gipsy Queen.

'Gipsy Queen,' she said, 'do you think that I

might have breakfast with you this morning? I should like to, very much indeed.'

'Of course you may, pretty little dear,' replied Floribel, 'and so may this little boy. You shall both have breakfast, not in my tent, but just outside here in the sunshine. We can give you delicious soup. Do you like soup for breakfast?'

Floribel spoke in quite a refined way. She rather minced her words than otherwise; and as she shook her pretty head her long red coral earrings dangled. Rosaleen looked at her with more and more admiration.

'How delightful you are!' she exclaimed. 'I should like to live in your tent with you.'

'Well, it might be managed,' said Floribel.

'Might it?' asked Rosaleen. 'That is if I wanted to come very, very badly. I might want to, you know. It is quite possible I would bring this little boy with me.'

'Oh, no, no! I couldn't,' said Fred in a whisper.

'Don't forget that I am your liege lady. You have taken your vow, and must stick to it,' said Rosaleen, giving Fred an impatient poke.

'Any little boy who disobeys his liege lady, the dogs have him,' said Floribel in a low voice of intense meaning.

Fred now turned as white as a sheet. He came close up to Rosaleen.

'Of course I'll do anything you wish, dear Rosaleen,' he said.

'That's right,' answered Rosaleen. 'And I might come to live with you some day, Floribel; and I might bring this little boy with me?'

'It could be arranged,' said Floribel in a dubious sort of voice. She looked Rosaleen all over, and then, leaving her post by the door of the tent, walked across the greensward in the direction where Hepsibah Lee was standing. Hepsibah was standing with her arms akimbo; she was giving directions to one or two swarthy gipsy men. Floribel glided almost like a dream across the sward. As she approached the stout old woman her walk broke into a light sort of dancing movement.

'Isn't she lovely?' said Rosaleen, watching her from where she stood herself. 'Didn't I tell you, Fred, that there were no people in all the world like the gipsies?'

'I don't know,' answered Fred. 'I don't like her. I wish—oh! I do wish you would come away.'

'I will after breakfast,' replied Rosaleen.

'Oh! it may be too late then. Perhaps they will steal us,' said Fred.

'Not they,' answered Rosaleen. 'They wouldn't

steal me. Besides, I dare say I shall come and live with them presently; it's very likely, if things are too unpleasant at home. It greatly depends on how the truce ends. But now, don't let's talk any more; Floribel is coming back. Isn't she quite lovely?'

'Ye—es,' said Fred in a dubious sort of voice.

'Oh! I think her beautiful; and so would you if you weren't such an awful little coward,' replied Rose in a voice of withering scorn.

Poor Fred thought of Peach, of Kenneth, of Nina, and Malcolm. How he longed to be safe back again with the Odds! How terrible was his fate now that he had joined the Evens!

Floribel came gently back; she was now accompanied by the old woman.

'I have been talking to Hepsibah about you,' she said, turning to Rosaleen; 'and we are very glad indeed to give you and your little brother breakfast.'

'He's not my brother; he's my subject,' answered Rosaleen.

Floribel made no reply to that.

'We shall be very glad to give you breakfast.'

'And may I sit on your throne, Queen. I should like that awfully,' said Rosaleen.

'It can be done,' replied Floribel; 'but that won't make you Queen of the Gipsies, you know.'

'I want to be Queen of the Gipsies awfully. Do you think I could be at any time?'

'Well, my dear,' said the old woman, now interrupting, 'it's all a matter of money. How much money have you got, dear little missy?'

'Money?' exclaimed Rosaleen. 'I have not got any money.'

'It's a matter of money,' said the elder gipsy; 'it's a matter of ten pounds—that's what it is. The day you come here with ten pounds, Floribel will give up her throne to you, and you'll be Queen of the Gipsies.'

'Oh dear! oh dear! shouldn't I like it,' cried Rosaleen, and her eyes flashed fire.

'We mean it, dear little missy; but you must not breathe it to anybody. If either of you two children tell, why, we gipsies know how to punish, that's all. But if you don't tell, and if you like to bring your ten gold sovereigns, and put them into the centre of Floribel's palm, she will give up her throne to you.'

'And will you all do exactly what I tell you?' asked Rosaleen.

'To be sure, love.'

'Oh, what a general I shall make!' said Rosaleen. 'Do you know that I am at the head of an army now?'

'Poor little dear!' replied the elder gipsy; she touched her forehead, and glanced significantly at Floribel. She evidently thought that Rosaleen was not quite right in her head.

'Well, dear,' she said, turning to the child, 'you shall have everything you want, and we will all obey you, for the ten sovereigns. How soon do you expect to be coming along with the money, little love?'

'Oh! I wish I could come quickly; but I—there, I'll try and manage it somehow,' answered Rosaleen. 'I don't know how—I don't know the least bit how, but I'll manage it.'

'I expect you will, love; and here comes the breakfast.'

As the old woman spoke two gipsy children were seen approaching, carrying a little tray between them. It was a roughly-made wooden tray, and on it were two bowls of soup which smelt deliciously in the morning air.

Floribel danced into her tent and brought out a little rustic arm-chair.

'Here is your throne,' she said. 'It's where I sit generally; and that is my breakfast generally; but it shall be yours to-day, and little master's. You're hungry—aren't you, dear little missy?'

'Oh! I should just think I am,' replied Rosaleen.

'You know,' she added eagerly as she seated herself with great dignity in the small chair, 'I am a gipsy by birth; I 'm certain of it.'

'You must be, love; you are most likely our lost Queen,' said Floribel, nodding to the elder gipsy, and laughing as she spoke.

'Well, she 'll be our real Queen when she brings us the ten pounds,' remarked Hepsibah Lee; 'and now, darling, while you and your little comrade are eating your nice breakfast, Floribel shall dance before you.'

Rosaleen's eyes opened wide. This indeed was adventure; this was life; this was pleasure at its highest pitch. She took her little bowl in her hands and stirred the mixture with a wooden spoon. It was soup made of all kinds of different things: little bits of rabbit, little bits of hare and chicken, every imaginable meat seemed to be in this excellent soup; and Rosaleen was very hungry, and so also was Fred; and the dog Pincher came up close to them while they ate, and condescended to accept a chicken-bone from Fred, and after that looked at the little boy with some degree of favour.

Altogether it was lovely: the fresh morning air, the picturesque surroundings, the gipsies standing round—their dark eyes glowing with admiration as the pretty child ate her breakfast, with the lovely

Queen of the Gipsies dancing before her, swaying her arms, turning pirouettes, curtsying, sweeping backwards and forwards, each movement full of perfect grace.

'Oh! there is no life like a gipsy life,' cried Rosaleen. 'And I don't mind anything. I must—I must get the money; I must come to you; I must be your Queen.'

'You will let us know, dear, before you do come,' said the elder gipsy. 'I'll come round to the stile near your place. I know Inglenook well. I'll come to the stile at the bottom of the field near the copse most afternoons; and when you tell me you have got the money we'll be all ready for you. We'll move off the next day, for they might find you, missy. You won't mind that?'

'I won't mind anything,' said Rosaleen, 'if only I can be your Queen.'

'This is what will happen,' said Floribel. She suddenly came up in front of the child, dropped on both knees, and laid her head at Rosaleen's feet. 'There,' she said. 'I cannot stoop lower than that; and I'll do that for you when you take my crown and wear it.'

She dashed into her tent and brought out a curious tinsel crown. She popped it on her head.

'Not for you yet, missy,' she said; 'but it shall

be yours, and we'll all swear that we will obey you, and you shall be our sovereign lady, when you bring us the ten sovereigns.'

'Oh, I must—I must!' exclaimed the excited Rosaleen. She got up slowly.

'You have all been most kind to me,' she said, 'and I love you dearly. There is a great battle going on now amongst my own people; it is a battle between the Odds and the Evens. I'm general of the Evens; and when I join you, you'll fight my battles for me?'

'To be sure, to be sure, dear little missy,' replied Hepsibah Lee.

Floribel dropped a graceful curtsy.

'We must go now,' said Rosaleen. 'I'm awfully obliged to you. I'll come back to you as soon as ever I can. Come, Frederick.'

The two children walked quickly through the camp, followed by Hepsibah and Floribel in the distance. They then kissed their hands to Rosaleen's new subjects, and returned home.

'Well,' said Fred as they approached the house, 'what do you mean to do?'

'Get the money somehow,' answered Rosaleen.

'Ten sovereigns! How are you to get it?'

'I don't know. I'll manage. Perhaps mother will give it to me. I'm going to have a birthday

by-and-by; perhaps she'll give it to me. It's a good bit of money—isn't it?'

'It's an awful lot!' exclaimed Fred. 'I am glad it's so much. I don't want to go and live with the gipsies.'

'Oh, you're a poor sort,' said Rosaleen. 'I am almost sorry that I made you one of my subjects.'

They got home. Rosaleen climbed up by the pear-tree, and Fred reached his quarters. He felt a very miserable little boy, and considerably frightened. He had to keep his feelings from Peach and from the others, however.

Peach was standing looking somewhat grave as he ran down the passage. He had been to his own room, and washed his face and hands, and posed as a good little boy who had only just got up.

'You're quite late for breakfast; it's past eight o'clock,' said Peach. 'Where have you been?'

'Oh, nowhere,' answered Fred. The lie made him extra miserable. He pressed his hand against his heart.

'I wish I hadn't done it,' he said to himself. 'I would rather be dull than naughty, when all's said and done; and I won't go and live with the gipsies.'

Peach took his hand, and they went into the pretty breakfast room. The rest of the Carlingfords

were there in high spirits. There was to be a great picnic that day, and arrangements were being made. In the evening there was to be a meeting between Prudence and Kenneth, followed immediately afterwards by a conference on the part of the two generals, Nina and Rosaleen. Every moment of the day was full as full could be, and no one had time to notice Fred's rather pale cheeks and his want of appetite during breakfast-time.

CHAPTER XVII.

'IT CANNOT GO ON.'

IN the eyes of the elders the picnic was a great success. To begin with, the day was perfect — neither too hot nor too cold, neither too windy nor too still. The sky was, indeed, slightly fleecy with summer clouds, and the softest zephyr of a breeze was abroad; and the spot which they had selected for their gala feast was in itself perfection, shaded by magnificent beech and elm trees, with the river not far off, and the sparkle of the blue, blue sea in the distance.

They drove to the place—it was about twelve miles away—and during the drive the Odds and the Evens were as friendly, and laughed as heartily, and talked with as apparent relish as if there were no battle between them—as if there were no truce which so shortly was to come to an end. Nina, in particular,

was gayest of the gay. She wore white—a white dress, a white hat, and a pink parasol; and she looked so charming that it was a perfect pleasure to see her. Her laughter was as bright as the sunshine itself, and the gleam of her white teeth was quite dazzling. Her mother looked at her with ever-growing affection. Mrs Frere spoke of her with intense admiration.

'What a lovely creature she is!' she could not help exclaiming. 'She will be a perfect beauty by-and-by.' And then she and Mrs Carlingford linked their arms together, and walked about and talked of their children, as fond mothers will. They had little, little idea of all that was yet to come to pass, of the cloud which was to fall, and all the troubles ahead.

It is true that Fred, during the picnic, was a little quiet, and a little inclined to sit and brood. Even Amy, who attacked him vigorously with regard to his spelling, could not help saying to herself that he was quite a dull little boy; he could not spell the simplest words correctly, and when she went into words of four syllables, absolutely declined even to make the attempt.

'You are dull,' she said—'dull and cross. I am surprised; I don't know that I want to have you for my half-twin.'

Fred turned his gloomy brown eyes in the direction

of Rosaleen. He was tired from his morning's adventure; his heart was heavy, not only because he was false to his own people, but because of the lie he had told. He hated himself for being such a naughty boy, and wondered much at Rosaleen's spirits. Rose was as cheerful, as full of fun as though she had only got up at eight o'clock instead of her real hour, five. She was full of mirth, laughing, joking, talking all the time. She carried Peach away with her, and absolutely fascinated this somewhat quiet little girl. Not a single false note seemed to be struck during that brilliant day; and when the little party returned home in the shades of the evening, they one and all confessed that they had enjoyed themselves mightily.

It was arranged that Prudence and Kenneth were to meet each other in the brown parlour between eight and nine that night. This was a sort of neutral room devoted to the children on both sides. There they were to draw up conditions which were to be submitted to the two generals, as they were now universally called. They met punctually to the moment. Prudence flung herself into a luxurious lounge, and Kenneth stood before her.

'Well, Prue,' he said, 'what do you think of everything?'

'I think that everything is horrid,' replied Prudence. 'I may as well tell you frankly, Ken, that I think,

and so does Patience, that the main thing to do is to put an end to this most impossible situation.'

'That is what I think too,' remarked Kenneth. 'But how can we manage it? Something must be done which will not try the pride of our respective generals too severely.'

'Yes, that's about it,' said Prudence. 'I declare, when I come to think of it, I often feel that the very best thing possible would be to take Rosaleen, give her a sound whipping, and lock her up for a week. She is quite an intolerable child, and gives herself such airs. However, that is not the point. The truce will come to an end to-morrow night, and we must know on what conditions we stand.'

'Well, I expect we shall stand very much on the old conditions,' said Kenneth.

'And they are impossible,' said Prudence. She stamped her foot impatiently. 'Do you know that this is ruining my little sister?' she continued. 'You ought to represent it to Nina. She is grown up; Rosaleen is only a child. Rosaleen is very rude even to mother; and as to her conduct to Patience and myself, we refuse to speak to her, that's all. Little Amy is miserable; I constantly hear her crying. The atmosphere is laden, and a storm and general catastrophe must occur.'

'Well, what are we to do?' asked Kenneth.

'I have been thinking it out,' said Prudence, 'and I feel that nothing will clear the air but a battle. Whoever comes out victor in that battle dictates terms to the vanquished.'

'But what sort of battle do you mean? You don't suggest that we deliberately fight with weapons, and see on which side the greatest number of the vanquished will fall?'

'No, I don't mean it in that sense. I have been thinking things out. In the old days disputes like ours were settled by champions. Now, the two champions on this occasion ought to be Rosaleen and Nina. They ought to be set a race of some kind, in which Nina, of course, is to be handicapped, in order to make their powers about equal. They might either have a physical race or it might be something to learn. My opinion is that, as the fight has assumed somewhat serious dimensions, the decisive battle should consist of both.'

'How do you mean? I do not understand,' said Kenneth.

'Well, suppose Nina and Rosaleen were each to do a piece of recitation, for instance; and suppose, after that, they were to run a race, Rosaleen to start considerably in advance of Nina, so that the race should be about fair. Then whoever won on both

counts would have the victory. On the other hand, if Rosaleen won the race, and Nina recited best, which seems highly probable, there would have to be an umpire appointed, and some other test given. We might make this decisive test come, say, a fortnight hence, for the two champions must prepare for it. What do you say?'

'I don't think it is a bad idea,' replied Kenneth; 'but will the champions themselves consent?'

'We must see them both to-morrow evening, when the truce is supposed to end. In the meantime we might draw up conditions as clearly as we can. Until the victory is won, the old conditions of warfare must remain: but I do hope that this will put an end to things. Rosaleen can recite pretty well,' continued Prudence; 'and of course Patience and I would coach her. I think the umpires ought not to be any members of the family; but my father, for instance, and your mother. We need not tell them why we are having this competition; but we would simply ask them to give their votes without favour when the time comes.'

'Altogether it seems rather good,' said Kenneth. 'I wonder how you thought of it, Prudence. It is much the best thing to do. We must come to a decision, and before long; for, as you say, the present state of things is intolerable.

'Quite intolerable,' answered Prudence, 'Why, just think of it. By this time to-morrow night you and I must pass each other with the coldest remarks; we must pretend that we have no interests in common; we must keep as aloof as possible; and all the time there are my father and mother and your mother expecting us to have a jolly time, to be great friends, to be enjoying life to the utmost. It cannot go on, Kenneth; it cannot go on.'

'Well,' said Kenneth, 'I approve of your scheme. I will think it out, and let you know to-morrow night.'

Soon afterwards the two children parted. Prudence went back to Patience, and they talked a little further of what might be arranged. A race between the generals, preceded by a recitation from both! It would be an exciting moment. They agreed that the parents should be invited in proper style, and that amongst themselves they would subscribe for a feast for the occasion.

'It will all come in beautifully,' remarked Patience, 'and give us something to think of until the great battle comes to an end. Whoever loses must agree to submit to the other, and the great quarrel must be made up.'

Patience looked quite cheerful as she spoke—anything was better than the present state of things;

Why, just
you and
remarks;
rests in
ble; and
her and
time, to
utmost.

scheme.
morrow

rudence
further
en the
h! It
d that
e, and
be for

tience,
great
agree
must

—any-
ings;

The two queens met in the little copse at the bottom of the front lawn.
PAGE 209

ront lawn.
PAGE 209

anything was better than that look of defiance on Rosaleen's small face.

The next day passed without anything out of the way occurring; and at seven o'clock in the evening, by special invitation, the two queens or generals met in the little copse at the bottom of the front lawn. There were seats provided for them; and Kenneth, as the deputation for the Odds, and Prudence, as the deputation for the Evens, advanced. Kenneth was asked to make a little speech. He came forward, made a low bow, and thus addressed the two generals:

'General Rosaleen and General Nina,' he began, smiling slightly as he spoke, 'I have come to make a proposal. In these days we cannot run swords into each other, nor shoot each other with pistols, nor do anything stupid of that kind. We, the Odds and the Evens, are engaged in a great battle, and we are honestly desirous, we two delegates, to bring matters to a peaceful conclusion. We think, therefore, that the very fairest thing is that the two generals should act as champions in the matter, and prove which is the stronger. There is great difficulty about this, seeing that the general of the Evens, the Dark Rosaleen, is not yet quite twelve years old, and the general of the Odds, the fair Nina, is fifteen and a half. There is a great difference between these

ages; but, after careful thought, we believe that we can balance matters and have a fair test if only the generals themselves will agree. We propose, therefore, that this day fortnight the final test shall be given. We propose that my mother, Mrs Carlingford, and that your father'—here he nodded to Prudence—'Dr Frere, shall be the judges. We will simply tell them that we have arranged this competition, not making them unhappy by giving them any account of the important matter that hangs upon their decisions. We propose that Nina shall give us a recitation of anything she likes to select, in her most sprightly style and in her very best manner. We propose that her recitation shall be immediately followed by one from the Dark Rosaleen, who can recite any piece she fancies—she to be much helped in the meantime in getting up her piece. There will be every consideration given to the respective ages of each of the reciters. Nina's piece will have to be in every way more finished and more polished than Rosaleen's, or Rosaleen will win the victory. The two pieces having been delivered, the final test will be a mile race, Nina, of course, to be handicapped, so that both girls may have an equal chance.

'This is what we have thought out, and what we think will be the best solution of this great fight. In the event of Rosaleen winning in the race, and

Nina winning in the recitation, we will ask the umpires to give some final test, which shall decide the victory on one side or the other. Whoever is beaten must give in to the other; and on that night the great fight will finally cease. That is what I have to propose, and the delegate of the Evens, Prudence Frere, agrees with me in every particular.'

Having made this speech, which he did with great solemnity, Kenneth again bowed to the two generals and stepped back.

Nina gave a short laugh. Rosaleen tossed her proud little head and looked upward in her usual defiant manner.

'Well,' said Nina, bending towards Rosaleen, 'I am agreeable if you are.'

'What are to be the terms in case I am victorious?' asked Rosaleen. 'Am I to gain anything from this fight? Are we to be just as we were before?'

'Something further must be said on that point,' replied Kenneth, again coming forward. 'The terms of peace will be drawn up; the only thing is that the conquered must in advance promise to submit to them.'

'Then, in that case, I agree,' said Rosaleen. She laughed and bent towards Fred, who was sitting not far off; she stooped down and whispered in his ear:

'You'll be glad to be on my side. I'm going to make very hard terms for the vanquished, and I mean to win in this fight.'

Nina rose and held out her hand with a sudden graciousness towards Rosaleen.

'Dark Rosaleen,' she said, 'I submit to the terms made by the two delegates, and I hope that by this night fortnight the battle between us will have ceased. We will, in short, have buried our hatchets.'

'Quite right,' answered Rosaleen. 'I am agreeable.' She shook hands with Nina in a careless fashion, and, turning aside, walked towards the other end of the copse. After a moment or two Peach followed her.

'The truce is just at an end,' she said. 'I was very happy during the last three days. I do earnestly hope that Nina will win; and during the fortnight that has to pass, I hope, Rosaleen, you won't hate me too much, for you know I love you. I love you all, although I have to pretend to be your enemy.'

'Poor Peach!' said Rosaleen in a careless tone. 'You know,' she added, 'I mean to win in this thing, and I mean the terms of peace to be somewhat severe; but never mind, it will do you all good.' She tossed her head again and walked away, followed by Amy.

'Oh Rose!' said Amy, 'I do think this is the worst

thing in all the world for you. I earnestly hope Nina will win; yes, I do.'

'Take that, then, and that,' replied Rosaleen, turning in a furious passion. She gave her little sister a fierce blow on the cheek.

Amy staggered back, uttering a cry.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPELLING GIRL.

AND now the Odds and the Evens were indeed busy young people. There was but a fortnight to prepare. Each side was intensely anxious that its own champion should win. No pains were spared to secure the best recitation either for the Dark Rosaleen or the Fair Nina. On both sides the children fought hard for their own cause. It is true that Fred, miserable little boy—a sort of sergeant on either side—was always vacillating; now cheering up and trying to think of some wonderful way in which Nina might be helped with her recitation, or supported through the trials of her mile race, and now slipping away to have a word with Amy and Rose. The others, however, were too busy to notice Fred. Even Rosaleen and Amy thought him rather in the way; and Rosaleen once went up

to him and told him that, as the fight was likely to come to an end within the fortnight, she thought he had better stay with his own people.

'You 're such a little coward, you know,' she said, 'that there is no great gain in having you on our side.'

'But don't forget, Rose, that you 're my liege lady,' answered Fred.

'Oh, I don't. I 'll make things pretty hard for you when the time comes,' said Rosaleen. 'And now get away. You 're a very poor sort of boy.'

Fred himself felt that he was a very poor sort of boy, and he slunk into corners and refused to eat his meals, until his mother became quite anxious about him. Peach also observed the change in her little brother. After all, he was her twin; and although he had hurt her feelings very considerably on more than one occasion since the great fight began, she could not forget this fact of all facts.

When about a week had elapsed, Peach, having tried in every possible way to coax Fred out of his melancholy, went to see Nina on the subject. She found Nina in her pretty bower-like room. She had made the room now a picture with flowers and fancy needlework, and some of her own photographs scattered about. Nina was seated where the soft summer air came in and gently stirred the hem of

her white dress and ruffled the locks of her golden-brown hair. She was busy reciting under her breath the piece she was to do on the great occasion, when Peach entered.

'Do shut the door gently, Peach,' said her sister.

'It 's the wind that makes it slam so,' replied the little girl. 'May I talk to you for a minute or two, Nina.'

'Of course, darling. What is the matter?'

Nina was a very imperious girl, but she was always gentle and kind to Peach. There was a hungry look in Peach's eyes which had ever and always the power of appealing to her heart. She closed her book now somewhat slowly, and then drew her little sister down to sit near her.

'Well, little girl,' she said, 'what is the worry? I hate to see that frown between your brows; it will spoil your pretty forehead when you grow up.'

'Oh, never mind about that,' cried Peach, frowning more deeply than ever. 'I am so anxious about Fred; I can't understand what is up with him.'

Nina looked thoughtful.

'I understand perfectly,' she said; 'but I would rather not say.'

'You would rather not say, Nina? But you must;

you don't know how altered he is. He quite hates to go about with me; he is always watching and peeping round corners; and whenever Amy appears, or Rose, he gets such a fiery red, just as if he had a secret with them.'

'I expect he has,' replied Nina. 'I think I know what is the matter; but it would be scarcely fair to say. Leave him alone, Peach; don't let mother be anxious about him. Poor Fred is suffering from a guilty conscience; but he will be all right this day week. This day week everything will be cleared up.'

'Oh! I hope so,' said Peach very earnestly. 'It has been miserable—has it not, Nina?'

'Well, I don't know,' answered Nina. 'In some ways I have enjoyed it; but, after all, perhaps you're right, little Peach, and battles and quarrels are bad things. I have enjoyed myself to a certain extent.'

'But you know you have not been at home. When you were away in London it did not make much difference to you—did it?'

'You are quite right there, wise little sister.'

'It made a great difference to me,' continued Peach. 'You know Rosaleen and I are in the same class at school, and I never could do my lessons properly, for I found her eyes always watching me, and I

got quite nervous. She is a very fierce little girl—is she not, Nina?'

'Oh, she could be splendid if she liked,' exclaimed Nina; 'but she wants some lessons in self-control. But, Peach dear, you must not keep me any longer. I have got to win this victory; it would be perfectly terrible for her own sake if Rosaleen were to be conqueror.'

'She is working very hard, I know,' said Peach. 'She goes into the copse every day with Prudence and Patience, and recites her piece. I hear her. She has taken "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay." I don't know if you know it.'

'I have only just read it,' answered Nina in a careless tone. 'It is by Oliver Wendell Holmes—is it not?'

'I don't know; perhaps so, Nina. But she does it with great action, and I hear them laughing. She is so funny when she likes.'

'Yes, yes,' replied Nina a little impatiently.

'And what is your piece, darling Nina?'

'Tennyson's "Revenge,"' replied that young lady in a quiet tone. 'And I mean to do it. Oh yes, I mean to do it. They shall see it all. Don't interrupt me now, Peach. Do run away.'

'Yes, I'll go,' answered Peach. 'It is rather dull,' she added, heaving a profound sigh. 'I may not

play with Amy, whom I like so much; and I may have nothing to do with Rosaleen; and of course Prudence and Patience, even if they were allowed to speak to me, would be quite too busy; and Fred is no good; and Ken and Malcolm are out all the day by themselves. It is a little dull; but I—I'll try and think how jolly we'll all be in a week's time.'

'Do, dear. You can sit on the step if you like, and take a story-book; only don't interrupt me when I am doing little pieces aloud.'

'Mayn't I clap you when you do them extra well?' asked Peach.

'Not to-day. When I know the "Revenge" properly you shall come and hear me recite it. You shall be my coach, dear. Now, what do you say to that?'

'I say that you are the dearest darling in all the world,' answered Peach, throwing her arms impulsively round Nina's white neck. The little girl had nearly reached the door when she suddenly turned round.

'By the way,' she said, 'have you spoken to mother yet about being umpire on the day of the great trial?'

'No; I mean to see her this morning,' answered Nina. 'It is best for me to tell her. Prudence said she would ask her father.'

'May I come with you when you speak to her?'

Nina hesitated for a moment, but Peach's face looked so keen and longing that she nodded her head.

'Then I am quite happy, and I'll wait as long as ever you want me to,' replied the little girl. She ran out of the room, and Nina resumed her careful study of Tennyson's 'Revenge.' At last the task she had set herself came to an end; she could repeat all the words without referring once to the book, and her very voice seemed dreamy as she uttered the last line, 'And the little *Revenge* was lost evermore in the main.' She jumped up hastily.

'Where are you, Peach?' she called out.

Peach put her small face round the open window.

'I have been listening. I know you will win the victory; you are perfectly, perfectly splendid,' said the child. 'And now do let us go to mother.'

Hand-in-hand they ran down the cool corridors, and entered the morning-room where Mrs Carlingford and Mrs Frere were happily engaged together. Mrs Frere was reading to Mrs Carlingford, who was employing her fingers over some fancy needlework. Both ladies put down their occupations when the girls appeared.

'Well, Nina, what is it?' said her mother.

'We have come, mother, to make a request,' replied Nina—'Peach and I; and we want to make it in the name of both Odds and Evens. You understand—don't you, mother?'

'Yes, so far I understand,' answered Mrs Carlingford. 'What is it, dear?'

'Tell us all about it, Nina,' said Mrs Frere, smiling. 'I wonder if it has anything to do with the request which was made to my husband this morning?'

'Did Prue ask him anything?' inquired Nina eagerly.

'Yes; but please speak out yourself now.'

Thus adjured, Nina turned to her mother.

'We are going to have a feast this day week,' she said. 'The feast will take place at seven o'clock in the evening. We are going to have it on the lawn in front of the house. We will put up the tent, and have all kinds of good things. We want you, mother, and Dr Frere, and you, Mrs Frere, to be present; and afterwards, when the feast is over, something very important has got to happen.'

'And what is that?' asked Mrs Carlingford, smiling up into Nina's beautiful face.

'Well, mother, Rosaleen and I have each decided to recite something.'

'You and Rosaleen?' said Mrs Frere. 'But, why,

my dear Nina, you are grown up, and Rosaleen is only a little girl.'

'Nevertheless we have so decided,' replied Nina, turning and glancing at Mrs Frere with a full, straight expression in her blue eyes. The eyes seemed to say, 'Ask me no further.' Mrs Frere respected the confidence Nina was reposing in her by this look. She always did understand children wonderfully.

'Yes, yes,' she said; 'you are both going to recite something.'

'We each of us are going to recite; we each of us will do our utmost to do as good a recitation as possible. We want mother and Dr Frere to be the judges of which girl has done best. After the recitation we are going to run a mile race.'

'Really, I do not at all know that I approve of these races for girls,' remarked Mrs Carlingford, with slight annoyance in her tone.

'Well, just this once, mother; and you know I love running,' said Nina.

'But, again, the difference between you?' exclaimed Mrs Frere.

'Oh, of course I shall be handicapped,' replied Nina. 'The race will be perfectly fair; the umpires shall judge; and after you, dear mother, and Dr Frere have pronounced your verdict, we will ask you and Mrs Frere to go away, for there is a little

secret matter which we cannot explain, and everything hangs on whether I am victorious or Rosaleen is victorious.'

A half-startled, half-pleased look came into Mrs Frere's eyes; she glanced at Mrs Carlingford. Neither of the ladies said a word for a moment.

'You'll do it—won't you, mummy dear?' said Nina.

'Of course, dear, gladly; but don't tire yourself too much learning difficult pieces. We want you children to have a very free and happy time, without any lessons to worry during these holidays.'

'That is what I think, mother,' said Peach, heaving a deep sigh as she spoke.

'Dear me, Peach!' cried her mother, 'you are very nearly as pale as Fred.'

'Oh mother!' said Nina, 'I am glad you reminded me. I want to tell you that there is nothing at all the matter with Fred—I mean nothing the matter with his health. He is perfectly well, and will be in his usual spirits when the feast is over. He is a little anxious in his mind; that is all. Don't question him, please, mother darling, nor take any notice of his'——

'His dreadful moony, moony ways,' interrupted Peach.

Both girls laughed, and a moment later went out together.

Meanwhile Rosaleen was as busy as busy could be. If ever a little girl was determined to win, she was. She dreamt of her victory at night, and thought of it during the daytime; she talked of it to Amy whenever she had a chance of being alone with her, and whispered it to Prudence and Patience until they were both perfectly sick of the subject. She had worked her slaves, as she termed the rest of the Evens, very hard during those days. They were obliged to hear her recite two and three times a day, and each evening she ran the mile race, Amy running with her, and getting very hot and tired in consequence.

'If this kind of thing goes on much longer,' said Amy, 'I shall forget all my spelling; my head gets quite confused. I am not meant to be one of those dreadful athletic young ladies.'

'Indeed, that you are not,' replied Rosaleen, with some scorn. 'You're nothing but a dreadful prosy spelling-girl. I'm 'shamed to own you for a sister. But you won't like it at all when I have drawn up my rules for the peace; you had better be pleasant to me during this week. In future all you children will have to do pretty much as I like, and you had better begin to humour me now.'

They all laughed at this, for they did not expect for a single moment that Rosaleen would win. But Rosaleen herself was determined to win; and, what is more, she was determined not only to be queen of her own little party, but Queen of the Gipsies as well. She thought of this as the height of all worldly bliss. How could she compass it? By what possible means could she secure the ten pounds which she would have to give to the present beautiful Queen before she was allowed to take possession of her throne? Suddenly an idea occurred to her.

'My enemies might give it to me if I am victor,' she said to herself; 'between them they might all subscribe. I would not tell them why. I have read in history that victorious kings levy taxes on their vanquished subjects. I could levy a tax on every one of those horrid Odds. They are sure to have money. Now, just let me think. Nina—she'll have to give me two sovereigns, Ken two sovereigns, and Malcolm two sovereigns, and the little ones a sovereign each: that would be eight sovereigns; and then my very own would give me the remaining two pounds. Yes, they would easily make it up. They are as rich as they can be, they have all got accounts in the savings-bank, and they can give their money to the victorious queen; and then I'll

be Queen of the Gipsies. I need not live with them always; but I can go away with them for two or three days at a time, and nobody would miss me. Even if mother missed me, she would be very proud of my being a queen, a liege lady who wore a crown. Oh, it's lovely—lovely! I'll certainly do it.' The little girl danced up and down.

Amy, who was lying full-length on the grass, raised her face to watch her.

'Now, what is up?' she said. 'What is in the back of your head?'

'Oh, nothing. Hear me say "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay,"' replied Rosaleen.

'I am so dreadfully sick of it,' cried Amy. 'There never was a poem I hated so much.'

'Then you're a very silly girl. I am going to say it now. You listen. Doesn't it go fine?' The little girl struck an attitude. 'This is the part I am not quite sure of. Now, you hear me. Take the book.' She threw a book as she spoke at her sister. 'Third verse; now I'm on; listen:

> 'In building chaises, I tell you what,
> There is always somewhere a weakest spot—
> In hub, tire, felloe, in spring or thill,
> In panel, or cross-bar, or floor, or——

Oh, bother!' interrupted Rosaleen, suddenly breaking off. 'I never could think of those horrid words.

It's a sort of a poem for you; you would learn a lot of spelling by it.'

'Yes, that's the best of it,' said Amy. 'I never knew before how to spell "felloe;" it's very interesting.' She pored over the book. Rosaleen danced in front of her.

'Give it up—give it up,' Rosaleen cried; 'everything depends on my being victorious. Give me the book, and I'll run away by myself; you stay here, and at the end of half-an-hour I'll be back with you again; and then we'll build the chaise. Oh, what fun! what fun!'

'How I hate chaises,' thought Amy, 'and how I hate Rosaleen in her present mood! It is all horrid —horrid.' She thought dismally over the fast-fleeting holidays. 'They will go on the wings of the wind,' she said to herself; 'and everything is so dull. I wish Fred were here. Fred and I might really have a pleasant time.'

There came a rustle in the grass near, and a moment afterwards a pale-faced, sad little boy dropped himself down by Amy's side.

'I heard you say that, and I am obliged to you, Amy,' said Fred.

'Thanks,' replied Amy. 'I wish you would cheer up, Fred.'

'Oh! I like being near you. I did like being near

Rosaleen; but she is so queer. You know I'm a sort of a spy; it's an awful position for me to hold.'

'Well, it is somewhat contemptible,' replied Amy; 'but think of all the spelling you'll learn. You'll forget that you were a spy when you're grown up, and you'll be one of the best spellers in your class. You'll never be ploughed on account of your spelling; lots of fellows are, I can tell you.'

'Are they?' answered Fred. 'You know I think it is horrid to learn spelling.'

'What do you think of the "Torricellian vacuum"?' said Amy, looking full at Fred. 'I found it this morning under "T" in the dictionary. There are lovely words under "T." "Tormentil" is another word. Aren't they delicious?'

'I don't think so,' answered Fred. 'It gives me a headache to hear you speak them.'

'Oh, well then, I won't. You look quite sad to-day. I don't know what to make of you.'

'I suppose I'll be all right this day week,' said Fred. 'Nina is sure to win.'

'Don't you be too sure that Nina will win. Rosaleen is frightfully clever when she likes; she's learning such a wonderful thing, full of the most difficult spelling words. That's my one comfort; I shall learn a lot of new words. It's an American

poem called "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay." She does it so dramatically—that's the word; she's a born actress, is Rosaleen.'

'So it seems,' answered Fred. 'Oh Amy! if any one were to find us now.'

'Well, why should they?' replied Amy. 'I am very anxious to have some one to talk to. I find it just as dull as you do. Come along into the thick shade of the trees. We Evens have got this copse to ourselves; the Odds are fair enough, I must say —all of them except you—and they never come to disturb us here. Come along right in under the shade of the thick trees; it will be beautifully cool. I'll tell you a story about a little boy who missed his examination and came to awful grief because he would not study his spelling.'

'Couldn't you make up the story about the boy doing something else?' asked Fred.

'No, for nothing else is so interesting,' replied Amy. 'Here, come along.' She took her little companion's hand, and turned with him under the thick shade of the trees.

'How lovely they are!' said Fred, looking up.

'Oh, never mind about that; think of a long word which means lovely, and spell it to me.'

'I won't; you're quite crazed on spelling.'

'Oh, I'm not crazed,' answered Amy, leaning back

against the trunk of one of the trees. 'I'm not crazed a bit; but I have got a speciality. Spell "speciality."'

'I won't.'

'Well, you need not; but you'll never learn unless you take the opportunities granted to you. Think of being great own friend to a specialist like me. Every one has to have a speciality in these days. I shall coach for spelling, if nothing else turns up when I am old.'

'I should think you could,' said Fred. 'I should think by the time you are old there won't be a word in the English language you couldn't spell.'

'There's scarcely that now,' replied Amy proudly. 'My masters and mistresses at school praise me tremendously for the way I spell; and I write very neatly too,' she added. 'I am certain to get on.' She tossed back her head of fair hair, and a pleased expression stole across her face.

CHAPTER XIX.

A BETWIXT.

MEANWHILE some one else was the reverse of pleased; that some one else was Peach Carlingford. Peach was unhappy; there was no doubt whatever on the subject. She had not been sure of the fact for some time; but she no longer doubted it. She was alone—very much alone. Nina, who was kind to her as elder sister can be kind to younger, was not all-sufficient. Peach needed companions of her own age, and she had none. She thought yearningly of Amy, whom she liked very much; of Rosaleen, who many a time in the old days had fascinated her out of all thought of self; but most of all, most deeply of all, did she yearn for Fred, for Fred was her twin, her very own. Had they not been babies together? Had they not ridden for such a long time in the same perambulator? Had they not

sat at the same nursery-table? Had they not worn —oh! that was such a long time ago—little frocks so like that no one knew which was Peach and which was Fred?—for in those days they had been very, very like in face, the same expression in their eyes, the same contour of feature, the same little shock-heads. Now, it is true Fred's eyes were brown and Peach's gray, but in the distance people did not notice that; and so alike were the twins that her mother had decorated Peach with a bow of cherry ribbon in order that she might always be known from Fred. How passionately they had loved each other in those days!—Peach, the stronger character of the two, leading Fred where she liked; Fred obeying Peach, and admiring her, and consulting her; and Peach happy as little sister ought to be with such a devoted brother.

Now everything was changed; they were no longer young children. They had parted, however, from their closest of all companionships when one had to go to a girls' school and the other to a boys'; but still they had loved each other, had no secrets from each other, had spent every moment they could in the society of each other. Now Fred was almost lost to Peach. It is true that he still sat by her side whenever she could induce him to do so; but he was a silent, morose little boy, with a longing

hunger in his eyes, and a way of flushing up red when Amy or Rosaleen appeared.

On this particular afternoon, when Fred, contrary to the rules of warfare, had stolen silently away to enjoy the society of Amy and Rosaleen, if he could get them, Peach found herself quite alone. The early dinner was over; the dullest time of the day was at hand. It was too hot to go out anywhere; the shelter of the trees, the refuge of a story-book, were all that lay before her. She went gloomily to the little shelf where the nursery books were kept, took down the *Swiss Family Robinson*, and, tucking it mournfully under her arm, went out. She had read the *Swiss Family Robinson* almost a hundred times. She knew every event in that fascinating and improbable work. She adored the book; but the great interest in it was over. Still, she might as well have that as another; the ordinary stories were not to her taste to-day. She would take the *Swiss Family Robinson* under a tree, and try to believe herself one of them.

She selected the most shady tree in the plantation which was to the right of the house, sat down, leant up against the trunk, and opened the book. In five minutes' time she found herself nodding over the well-worn pages. In her sleep she dreamed a dream. She dreamt that she and Fred were alone—alone on a

desert island. They were deprived of almost all the necessaries of life, but they were happy, intensely happy, for they were together; and Fred had resumed his old pleasant self, and the sorrows and troubles of this dark time were as though they had never been. Peach awoke with a start and looked round. She was more discontented than ever. What was the matter with everybody? Why should all the world be so gloomy? Why should the lovely holidays be flying by in this unsatisfactory manner? She must find Fred; she must talk to him; she must bring him back to her side again. Had she been in any way to blame that he had so completely deserted her?

'It all began the day Nina came back,' thought Peach to herself. 'Fred was rude, and I was rude, and our quarrel began; and now everything seems to be a quarrel. I only wish the holidays were over, and that we were back at school. Oh, I will find Fred; I must find him.'

She rose, stretched herself, left the despised *Swiss Family Robinson* under the shady tree, and pursued her way along a very sunshiny path in the direction of the copse. She knew quite well that the Evens had taken possession of this special copse. Indeed, as she now approached she heard the sound of a very high-pitched and determined voice declaiming

the merits of a certain sort of chaise. The voice rose shrill and sank low; sometimes it was full of passion, and sometimes full of uncontrollable mirth. Peach stood still and listened; then, feeling that she was doing a dishonourable thing, she clapped her two hands to her ears and turned swiftly away.

She meant to mount a little rising knoll of ground, and sit there and wait for Fred to make his appearance. She could not quite tell for certain that Fred was in the copse, but she was almost sure he was. She was almost sure, and this was the most terrible sting of all, for Fred was an unworthy and deceitful little boy.

She mounted the knoll, seated herself, tucked her knees up close to her chin, clasped her hands round them, and gazed disconsolately in front of her. Suddenly she heard a rustling to the left; and, looking down, she saw a little way to the right of the knoll a girl seated under a tree, and a boy lying at her feet. The girl was Amy—Amy Frere; the boy was Fred Carlingford. Peach gazed as though the sight would burn her vision. She rubbed her eyes to make sure. If they looked up they could not fail to see her; but would they look up? She scarcely dared to stir; she did not want Fred to know that she had discovered him in his dishonour-

able and shabby conduct. She wondered if she could glide away down the other side of the knoll; but the two children were really so close under her that she did not dare to make the slightest movement. Suddenly there came an end to her distress. Fred raised his eyes, was attracted by the spectacle of a small girl seated on the top of the knoll, and the next moment had discovered that it was his sister Peach. He turned as white as a sheet.

Peach rose slowly.

'I am coming up to you, Peach. Don't, don't go away,' cried Fred. He flew from Amy's side, rushed up to his sister, and flung himself at her feet.

Peach did not at first say a single word. Fred crept nearer to her, took her hand, clasped it in both of his, and pressed his hot forehead against it.

'I have a headache,' he said. 'Don't, don't, don't be angry.'

'It is past anger,' replied Peach in a low voice.

'Oh, don't!' said Fred. 'My head is aching fit to split. Let me press my forehead on your hands. Oh, don't, don't be angry!'

'I am not,' answered Peach.

'But you are, or you are worse.'

'Yes, it is much worse than anger,' answered Peach in a hopeless sort of voice.

Fred glanced up at her.

'You 're going to tell, I suppose,' he said.

'Oh no; telling won't do any good,' replied Peach. She looked steadily at him; then her great big gray eyes filled with tears—filled to overflowing; a drop rolled down each pale cheek. 'I had guessed it, and now I am sure—that is all,' she said.

'Yes,' said Fred very gloomily. 'You were quite right; you always were monstrous clever.'

'No, I was not; but I could not help seeing that that is why you are unhappy.'

'Yes,' replied Fred, with a nod.

'When did you go and join the Freres?' asked Peach.

'About a week or ten days ago.'

'And you really belong to them?'

'I 'm a betwixt,' said Fred.

'A betwixt? What is that?'

'I don't belong really to either side. I wouldn't do either side an injury—that 's what I mean.'

Peach had no tears in her eyes now; they seemed almost to scorch in the brightness of their gaze.

'And you call yourself my brother!' she exclaimed. 'I used to be proud of you. I used to think it was so nice to be a twin. I didn't know, I couldn't guess, that you were to be a'——

'Say it out,' said Fred. 'I would rather you spoke it out.'

'A spy,' cried Peach. She got up trembling, and swayed slowly from side to side; the intense look on her face, the mixture of pathos and anger in her eyes, terrified Fred, who, now lying full-length on the ground, tried to grovel at her feet.

'Oh! get up; that makes it worse,' said the little girl. 'I am going away. I won't tell any one. You can go back to them—to Amy, I mean, and to Rosaleen.'

'And won't you—won't you—forgive me?'

'I can't—I won't. I don't want to speak to you. I—— Oh Fred! Fred! you're breaking my heart.'

'You won't tell any one?' said Fred.

'Tell!' exclaimed Peach. 'As if that would do any good. No, I won't tell; only I'll tell you what I will do. You shan't go backwards and forwards. You shan't stay with the Odds now. I won't tell; but you shan't be with us learning our plans. Nina shall not think that you are her subject, faithful and true, as you ought to be; you shall stay with the Evens.'

'But they don't want me,' said Fred, who was now in a state of terror; 'it is only Amy and Rosaleen—it's Rosaleen really. Prue and Patience know nothing about it. You cannot mean what you are saying, Peach; you cannot possibly mean it.'

'I mean that I shan't let you be a spy finding out

our secrets,' said Peach. 'It's the meanest thing in all the world. I never heard of anything like it.'

'But you promised not to tell.'

'I did, and I won't tell. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll stay with you always now, except just when you're in bed at night. I'll stay with you; you'll have to bear it. You can go back and tell those Evens that I have found out, and that you're not going to them any more. You shall stay with me; if you don't I'll tell, and Nina will lock you up. Oh! you are too mean for anything. Go!'

Peach rose. Any action was better than none; any companionship was better than no companionship. Even to walk about with a little boy who was a spy was more exciting than to read the *Swiss Family Robinson* for the hundred and first time. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes bright once more.

'Go and tell Amy; she won't expect you again when she knows,' said Peach. 'I am going to wait here.'

Fred looked at her. Her face was so hard, so defiant, that he knew she would have no mercy on him just now. Perhaps he could get away from her by-and-by; for the present he must follow Peach's whim.

'It's awful being a betwixt,' he thought to himself.

'Peach is awful when she likes. I suppose I am horrid mean.'

He ran down the knoll into the copse, and found Amy, who was just preparing, with a most long-suffering look on her face, to hear Rosaleen repeat 'The One-Hoss Shay' for the twentieth time.

'Well, what have you come spying round for now?' asked Rosaleen.

'Only this,' replied Fred. 'Peach has discovered; she knows what I am. She says I am not to go back to you, and that she will watch me day and night if possible. I dare say I can get away from her, but not at present; so you needn't expect me for a little bit.'

'I don't want you,' said Rosaleen. 'I was sorry you ever swore allegiance to me. You're a very poor sort of boy, and I don't want you; nor does Amy. Go now; we are busy. Go.'

Thus repulsed on all hands, poor Fred slunk back again to Peach. Even Peach, standing there, tall and sad and dignified, looked more worthy of his respect than did the dangerous fascinating little Rosaleen, or Amy, whose spelling crank was making her quite unpleasant in the little boy's eyes.

'I have come back, Peach,' he said.

'Come,' answered Peach. She held out her hand, and they went silently down the hill; they passed

the tree under which the despised *Swiss Family Robinson* was reposing.

'Pick up that book,' said Peach.

Fred went and picked it up immediately.

'Go into the house and choose another book for yourself from the shelf, and come back to me.'

Fred obeyed. He chose a story-book by Fenn, and the two children sat down side by side.

'You can read aloud to me,' remarked Peach; 'it will do you good.'

'But I hate reading aloud,' replied Fred. 'Are you going to be a sort of jailer to me, Peach?'

'That's it,' answered Peach—'a sort of jailer. But never mind; it's better than telling, isn't it? And if I see you sneaking off to the Evens once more I shall tell, so you must make up your mind.'

'But I have made it up. I am going to be very good and nice to you, and you'll love me once more,' said Fred in a more contented tone.

He gazed up at his sister; and, naughty little boy that he was, poor Peach felt the comfort of his soft, warm presence.

CHAPTER XX.

HEPSIBAH LEE.

PEACH was a very determined, but all the same a very kind, jailer. She took care that Fred should not have an idle moment. She kept him working for her as he had never worked for her before. He had to run all her messages; he had to read aloud to her; he had, in short, to make Peach's time as lively as possible. She planned short excursions with him, and took care to talk all the time. She was a wonderful story-teller—quite as good as Rosaleen in her way; and she told marvellous tales to Fred. They were very nice; only they all held a moral; they were always stories about the good and the bad. The good always triumphed; the bad always came to grief. The bad either suffered always for their sins or repented under terrible circumstances.

Peach used to draw a long bow at these times. She used to make out that the sins of such a mean sort of boy as Fred could only be expiated by the most awful, awful suffering.

Fred used to look at her with his eyes wide open; and sometimes the tears would steal down his cheeks, and sometimes his baby lips would tremble. Peach saw the trembling and noticed the tears. She never pretended that she was well aware of the emotions which were passing in the little boy's mind.

'It will all be at an end at the beginning of the week,' she said to herself. 'We will all be happy once more, and Fred can be natural once more, and he will have learned his lesson, I think.'

At last the important, most important, day dawned. It was a glorious day towards the middle of August; there was not a cloud in the sky. As the great examination, the final test, was not to take place until the evening, the children were somewhat at a loss how to employ the early hours, the situation was altogether so strange. For, as the feast was to be their own feast, they had subscribed amongst themselves for money to carry it out. They could have fruit, it is true, from the garden, and Mrs Sweet promised them unlimited supplies of cream and milk; but they had to buy their own cakes, and to purchase their own tea and their own bon-bons, and they had

to go to all the trouble of arranging the tent in which the great festival was to be held.

On this occasion it was absolutely impossible for the Odds and the Evens not to meet; they were meeting all the time; they had to speak about the way the tables were to be arranged.

Nina ran into the tent early in the morning. She was followed by Peach.

'Now then,' she said, 'I think we'll have this table for the Odds, and that table just below it for the Evens. What do you say, Peach?'

But a clear, strong voice now interrupted her.

'I wish the Evens to sit at the big table,' cried the imperious voice of Rosaleen. 'I wish the Evens to sit there, and this is my place.' Here she pointed to the head of the table.

Nina frowned for a moment; she was a generous-hearted girl, however, in the main. She respected Rosaleen's youth, and would never dream of going into open fight with her except on the main questions.

'Just as you please,' she said lightly.

Peach's lips quivered.

'Can't we all sit together, Odds and Evens, just as we like?' she cried.

'Well, I do really think that would be the best plan,' said Nina. 'I should be sorry to have mother uncomfortable; she might be if she saw us at

different tables. And Dr Frere is so kind that I should not want him to be worried.'

'Of course not,' cried Rosaleen, her eyes flashing. She simply adored her father.

'Then suppose, Queen of the Evens, we agree to amalgamate our forces during the time of the festival,' said Nina. 'I really think it would be best. What do you say?'

'I think it would be worst on most accounts,' replied Rosaleen; 'but if it makes father anxious'——

'Well, as we hope the quarrel will be quite at an end to-night, we don't want to make any one anxious,' said Nina lightly. 'As you please, of course; but if you are determined to have the top table for your party, we must know immediately. Dr Frere will probably sit at our table, however, and my mother at yours; that would be the natural thing—would it not?'

'Oh, I could not have that for a moment!' exclaimed Rosaleen. 'I must be near my darling father. Yes, yes; let us mix up for the time.'

Accordingly this was arranged. Rosaleen ran out of the tent, and met Amy.

'Come along, Amy,' she said; 'we're mixed. It will be a wonder if we'll ever be separate again. The Odds and the Evens are mixed up for the feast, and I am bothered more than I can say.'

Amy laughed, however, with pleasure.

'I am glad,' she replied. 'I am sick of this fight.'

'Oh! you're a mean lot,' said Rosaleen. 'It's very unlikely—very unlikely indeed—that the fight will come to an end to-night. For, of course, I shall win; and if I win, Nina and the rest of the Carlingfords will have to agree to my terms.'

Amy did not say anything. In her heart of hearts she sincerely desired the victory to be on the side of Nina, for Rosaleen's manners had not endeared her to any of her sisters during the past sad months.

The preparations for the feast went on with vigour; everything was arranged in the most perfect harmony. Rosaleen, having once yielded, thought it best to keep rather out of the way, and the rest of the children were only too glad to follow Nina's directions. They had to pick quantities and quantities of flowers, and these were placed in long garlands down the centre of the festive board; and then the cakes, the jugs of lemonade, the jugs of cream, the junkets, all the various good things which were provided by kind-hearted Mrs Sweet, made their appearance.

'Oh dear! I don't want to eat any dinner to-day,' said Peach; 'I'll be so longing for the supper-time. What a grand, splendid feast it is!'

At last every possible preparation was made, and

the children went back to the house. They were to assemble on the lawn to conduct their parents, and in especial the two arbiters of their fate, into the tent not later than half-past six o'clock. They were all to be dressed in their best for the occasion.

Amy, having seen to every possible thing that she could with regard to the arrangements for the great feast, walked slowly back to the house. She had not seen Rosaleen for a couple of hours. She ran up to her room now, and, entering quickly and noisily, shouted out:

'It's time to dress, Rose; it's time for you to be getting into your finery.'

There was no reply to this speech, however, and she looked around her, to perceive, to her consternation, that the room was empty. It was already six o'clock. In less than half-an-hour the children ought to be all present on the lawn to welcome their guests.

Amy gave a vexed cry.

'Dear, dear,' she said to herself, 'what a terribly troublesome girl Rosaleen is; and on such an important occasion, too, not to be present! What are we to do?'

She stood for a moment considering, then said to herself, with a hasty exclamation:

'Well, whatever happens, I do not intend to be a sight; this kind of thing has never been a fault of

mine from first to last. I always meant to be a perfectly good little girl. I am not going to be untidy and disreputable in my dress now.'

She accordingly proceeded as calmly as she could with her toilet, darting anxious glances in the meantime at the little clock on the mantelpiece and towards the door. How quickly the time was flying! Would the room-door ever open to admit the untidy and wildly-excited little person of Rosaleen?

Amy got herself into a newly-washed white frock. She brushed out her long fair hair and tied it with blue ribbon; she took up her neat sailor-hat; she looked at her white gloves; she looked down at her neat shoes and stockings. Never was there a more perfect-looking little girl, the very essence of neatness and propriety.

It was now half-past six; but where—where was Rosaleen?

'I must go and look for her; she has forgotten us. What can be the matter?' thought Amy to herself.

She ran downstairs. In the hall she saw Peach. Peach also was dressed for the occasion. She looked neat, pale, and anxious as usual.

'Oh Amy, is that you?' said Peach. 'Where are you going?'

'I am going to look for Rosaleen.'

'Rosaleen? Hasn't she come in yet? Isn't she

dressing? Nina has already gone down to the field.'

'I am going to look for her,' said Amy.

'Would you like me to come with you? It seems as if we might be friends for the next few hours.'

'Oh, come if you like,' replied Amy. 'I am going to the copse; she's probably doing her last bit of recitation.'

The two girls clasped hands and ran across the lawn. The copse was a quarter of a mile away; they reached it hot and panting. There was no sign of Rosaleen—not a sound except that made by some birds about to sing their evening song, and some rooks settling down for their nightly repose.

'She is not there,' said Amy. 'Let's come along.'

But just at that moment Peach uttered an exclamation. 'Why, there she is,' she cried. 'She's standing there by the hedge. She's talking to a woman. I declare it's a gipsy woman. How exciting! I suppose it's one of the gipsies who have settled down in the Plantagenet Woods.'

Amy felt her heart turning cold. She did not know anything of Rosaleen's visit to the gipsies, but she did know the little girl's eccentric ideas with regard to them. She said hastily:

'You had better stay where you are, Peach. I'll run to Rosaleen and remind her.'

Peach stood still. Amy darted across the grass and rushed up to her sister. The soft grass did not echo her advancing footsteps, and she heard Rosaleen, who was eagerly holding converse with Hepsibah Lee, say emphatically:

'I think I'll be able to bring you the money to-morrow evening; and when I do'——

She had scarcely uttered the words before Amy laid her hand on her shoulder.

'Oh, don't! Oh, what's that?' cried Rosaleen, flashing round.

'It's me,' said Amy. 'You have got to come. It's nearly half-past six. You're a perfect sight.'

'Oh, am I? Good-bye, Hepsibah, good-bye. As I said before, I am sure to'——

Hepsibah put up a warning finger to her lips. Rosaleen blushed, and turned back with Amy.

'What did you come spying round me for?' cried Rosaleen. 'I quite hate you when you do that sort of thing.'

'But I didn't want you to be late. What were you doing with that woman; and why did you tell her you would bring her money? Why, you haven't got any money.'

'If you tell'—— said Rosaleen. She looked fiercely at her little sister.

'I'm not going to tell,' replied Amy; 'at least I

don't think I shall tell. But, all the same, I should like to know what it means.'

'Well, you won't know what it means; and if you tell'—— Rosaleen flashed another wildly indignant glance at Amy.

Amy shut her lips. 'What a wonderful comfort it will be when all this horrid time is over!' she said to herself. And now the two little girls had come up to Peach; and Rosaleen, roused at last to the fact that time was passing, consented to fly on all by herself to the house.

'What was she doing with that woman?' asked Peach as she and Amy followed more slowly.

'Oh, I don't know,' answered Amy, and she blushed as she spoke.—'It's horrid of me. I have the same as told a lie,' thought the poor little girl. 'I never did that before.'

Peach gazed at her in wonder.

'Don't you think we're all rather miserable?' she said slowly.

'Yes, I do,' answered Amy, tears filling her eyes.

'Don't you wish the fight was quite over?' continued Peach.

'Oh, don't I, beyond words to say.'

'Well, I expect it will come to an end to-night. Nina will win, of course. Nina is quite splendid when she chooses.'

Amy did not say anything. In her heart of hearts she longed beyond words for Nina to win; but what was the good of speaking? She waited down in the hall, Peach having already gone to the field, until Rosaleen made her appearance.

Rosaleen had put on a red cotton frock, and had tied back her luxuriant black hair with a piece of red ribbon. She now rushed up to her sister and took her hand.

'Here I am, neat, neat little goody-goody,' she said. 'Now then, we'll be with the others in a minute; and remember, you're not to tell.'

'If you keep reminding me,' replied Amy, 'I'll just tell; because you won't allow me to think of anything else. Don't say any more. I don't want to get you into a scrape.'

'Then that's all right.'

The two children ran across the lawn and entered the big field where the tent was erected and the feast spread. Already the three elders had arrived. Dr Frere and Mrs Carlingford, being the chosen umpires, were seated in two arm-chairs at one end of the field. Mrs Frere, at a little distance, was surrounded by two of her own children, and also by Peach and Fred Carlingford. She was talking to them in her gentle way, and making them laugh, as they almost always did when she was with them.

of hearts
but what
down in
eld, until

and had
piece of
ter and

ly,' she
rs in a

y, 'I'll
ink of
t want

ntered
l and
s had
g the
t one
, was
so by
g to
augh,
hem.

The next instant that sovereign was in the pocket of her little red frock.

PAGE 253

'You know, little mother, you're quite the very nicest little mother in all the world,' said Rosaleen, now rushing up to her parent and flinging her arms round her neck. 'There's no one nicer than you, unless perhaps it is my own dear father. Where is he? I want to hug him.'

Dr Frere was stooping down to pick up something, when a sudden shout sounded in his ears, and a pair of arms were flung tightly round his neck, causing him almost to stagger; then he rose to his feet, with a laugh, lifting Rosaleen as he did so into his arms.

'What is it, Rose? You almost upset my balance,' he cried, with a laugh.

'I wanted to hug you. I am in a monstrous good humour,' said Rosaleen. She kissed her father again frantically.

He returned her embrace, then saying gently, 'No more at present my dear,' put her back on the ground. But just at that moment, and before any one else could see, Rosaleen's quick eyes had been attracted by a bright object. She looked down. There was a sovereign on the ground. It must have dropped out of her father's pocket. She did not know why—she never for a single moment had meant to get money by underhand means before—but the next instant that sovereign was in the pocket of her

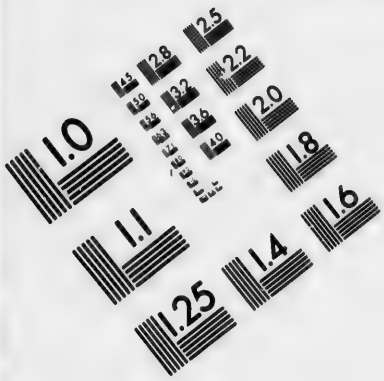
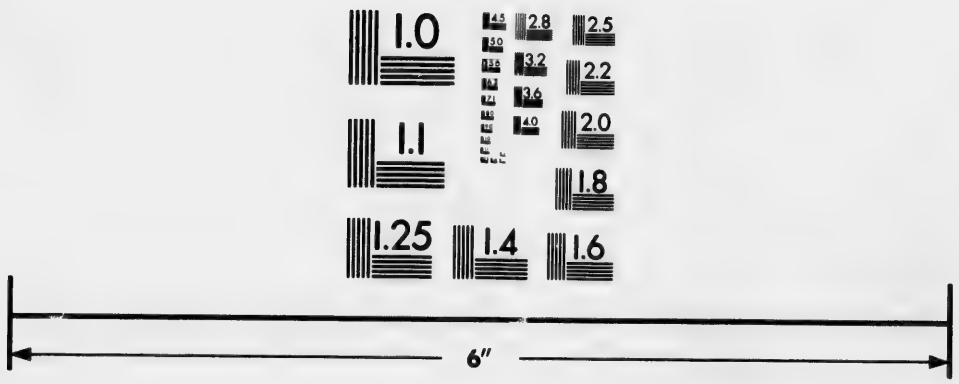
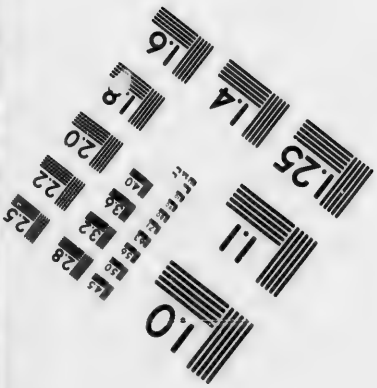
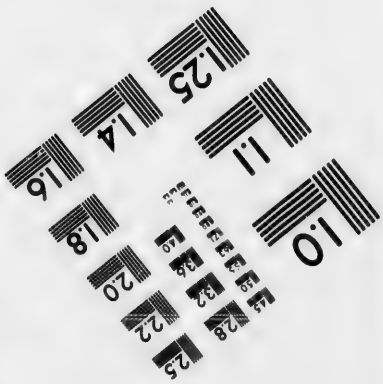


IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (MT-3)







Photographic Sciences Corporation

23 WEST MAIN STREET
WEBSTER, N.Y. 14580
(716) 872-4503

little red frock. Dr Frere had not missed the money, nor had any one seen Rosaleen's deft movement. Her eyes were flashing fire, her cheeks were aflame, her heart was beating tumultuously, for had not Hepsibah Lee told her that very evening that if she could bring the money by instalments she might occupy her vaunted throne any day?

'Whatever happens, I am safe now,' she thought; and no pricks of conscience and no fear of the consequences at present rose to mitigate her joy.

The next moment Mrs Carlingford rose. Nina came forward to her, and held out her hand with a pretty gesture.

'Mother,' she said, 'we want to lead you and Dr Frere to your thrones at the top of the tent. Won't you come this way?'

Nina, of course, was in white, and looked as handsome and bonny as girl could look.

They entered the tent, which was sweet with fruit and flowers, and so beautifully arranged that it did not feel at all close. The chairs at the farther end were in readiness for Mrs Carlingford and Dr Frere. Mrs Frere was conducted to the foot of the principal table, and then the children, helter-skelter, took their seats.

Dr Frere opened the proceedings with grace, and then uttered a few words of merry comment, which

set every one laughing. Then, as Rosaleen said afterwards, the feeding-time began.

'I must support myself well,' she thought. 'I have got a great deal to go through to-night. I am determined I won't be vanquished. I feel as if the blood of all my ancestors was crying out in me, "Conquer, Dark Rosaleen, whatever happens. Even if your life is the stake, conquer, Dark Rosaleen."'

The cups of tea were handed round; the junket, the cakes, the fruit, the cream, the different light dainties disappeared as if by magic.

'It is almost like a swarm of locusts,' thought Mrs Frere to herself as she watched how the healthy and apparently happy children demolished their food.

At last the board, which had been groaning with dainties, was almost cleared, and they all went out into the big field. The time had come; the great moment had arrived. Innocent Dr Frere and equally innocent Mrs Carlingford were to be the umpires; and Mrs Frere sat close to her husband, and thought how happy they all were, although she vaguely wondered why Nina had that restless look in her eyes, why her cheeks were a little too rosy, and why Rosaleen kept darting about uttering impatient words and scarcely able to control what the anxious mother considered undue excitement.

Dr Frere suddenly rose to his feet.

'Mrs Carlingford and I have been asked,' he said, 'to be umpires on this occasion. We do not know why our children have decided to have this competition. But anything that rouses enthusiasm and helps one to lessons of self-control is not to be despised; and I for one shall be exceedingly pleased to hear my great friend Nina Carlingford recite the stirring words of Tennyson's "Revenge;" and I shall be equally pleased to hear my own little daughter declaim "The One-Hoss Shay," a poem which, I remember, made me laugh a good deal when I was young.'

'It is Nina who is to come first, please, father,' cried Rosaleen, suddenly rushing forward and then going back to her place.

'Yes, I will recite the "Revenge" first,' said Nina. She turned a little white, glanced for a moment at her mother, and then stepped forward, standing in such a position that the umpires and the Odds and the Evens could all hear her with absolute ease.

CHAPTER XXI.

A STORMY HEART.

THE very breeze seemed to drop into stillness as Nina stepped to the front. She glanced to right of her, to left of her, and then began the stately and magnificent poem. At first her voice was a trifle tremulous, but soon it gained in power. She had an expressive voice; there was feeling behind —that suppressed feeling which tells more than anything else. As she had said, she meant to show the picture; she meant all those present to see the gallant fight between the One and the Fifty-Three. By the time she came to the words:

'We have fought such a fight for a day and a night
As may never be fought again!
We have won great glory, my men!
And a day less or more
At sea or ashore,
We die—does it matter when?
Sink me the ship, Master-Gunner; sink her, split her in twain!
Fall into the hands of God, not into the hands of Spain'

—by the time Nina had repeated these gallant words of the great Sir Richard Grenville, the children, even Rosaleen, had forgotten how much hung upon the poem. They were with Sir Richard in his last most gallant fight; and even Rosaleen felt the moisture rise to her eyes when Nina, dropping her voice, said slowly:

'We shall live to fight again, and to strike another blow;
And the lion there lay dying, and they yielded to the foe.'

When she came to the words:

'And the little *Revenge* herself went down by the island crags,
To be lost evermore in the main'—

there was a dead silence, followed, when recollection came to the startled and excited children, by a burst of rapturous applause. No one applauded more vigorously at this moment than the Dark Rosaleen herself. Enthusiasm was a great part of her little character; and she was raised now to such a pitch of excitement that she could almost have rushed to Nina, have clasped her round the neck, and said, 'Forgive me, forgive me. I will even bend my proud knee to one who can say such lovely things.'

But, alas for Rosaleen! she did not yield to this impulse. She caught Amy's eye watching her. It

seemed to the little girl that Amy was half-smiling. Did she guess that Rosaleen—the proud, determined Rosaleen—was nearly yielding?

'Never,' thought the Dark Rosaleen—'never! I am a Sir Richard Grenville in my way; whatever the odds against me, I will never yield.'

'It is now your turn, Rosaleen,' said her father, 'to come forward and repeat "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay."'

The little girl pulled herself together with an effort, stepped forward in her dainty, somewhat imperious style, and, clasping her hands before her, and slightly tilting up her proud little chin, began to utter the clever words of one of the most gifted humorists of his time:

'Have you heard of the wonderful one-hoss shay,
That was built in such a logical way?
It ran a hundred years to a day,
And then, of a sudden, it—— Ah! but stay,
I'll tell you what happened without delay—
Scaring the parson into fits,
Frightening people out of their wits,—
Have you heard of that, I say?'

Rosaleen's 'I say' was almost irresistible. There was a toss of the mane of black hair, a twinkling light came into the dark, dark eyes and the story proceeded. It is too long to relate here; but it caused a furor of excitement, and the chances

which had seemed decidedly in Nina's favour now veered round towards Rosaleen.

The mother could not help whispering to herself: 'Why, the child is an actress by nature. I never knew she could do it.'

There were shouts and clappings of hands, in which Nina just as generously joined as Rosaleen had done a few moments back when her recitation came to an end.

A little pause followed; the umpires were quite silent, not even glancing one at the other. The one-mile race was marked out. Rosaleen started as previously arranged, and Nina followed. How lightly and gracefully Nina ran; not putting herself out in the very least, not losing her breath, not hurrying, keeping all her strength for the last final spurt! As Rosaleen sped on there came a cheer from the Evens, who, notwithstanding their desire that the fight should end, could not but take an interest in their own champion. Rosaleen, excited by their shouts of delight and cries of 'Well done, Evens! well done, Evens!' was putting forth greater and greater strength, when, all of a sudden, her foot tripped against the hidden trunk of a tree which was half-buried in the grass. She fell. Nina ran past her, but paused to allow her to rise. She was up again in a second, rushing on; but she never

recovered her pace, and Nina won an easy victory of several yards.

The Odds and the Evens approached their two champions; then they went up to the umpires, who, in face of the fact that Nina's recitation was splendid, and her performance of the one-mile race most admirable, could not but decide in her favour. There was a moment of stillness, then there came a wild shout from every one; even Rosaleen, now ghastly pale, raised her little voice with the others. Peach suddenly went up to her.

'Why, you're going to faint,' she said. 'You have hurt yourself—have you not?'

'It is only my knee,' replied Rosaleen. 'Don't touch me, please; it will be all right in a minute.' Then she turned round and suddenly flung her arms round Peach's neck. 'Oh! I believe I shall faint; just let me sit down.'

Peach dropped on the grass, and Rosaleen leant against her.

'It's nothing, it's nothing,' she said.

Peach called to Fred. 'Bring some water,' she cried. 'We don't want to frighten mother. Quick! Rosaleen will be all right in a moment.'

Fred rushed into the tent, brought out a glass of water, and gave it to the little girl. She soon recovered her equanimity.

Nina, who was standing surrounded by her victorious subjects, now came forward.

'Mother,' she said, 'we are so much obliged to you, and we are so greatly obliged to you, Dr Frere; and no one feels happier than I do at this moment, for a great deal hung on this; and—and—oh! now I know it is all right; but will you, dear mother, and Dr Frere and Mrs Frere, leave us now? for we children have matters to arrange.'

As Nina spoke she bent and kissed her mother.

'It is as right as possible, mummy,' she said. 'It is better than right; it is splendid. A great deal hung on my winning. Oh, I am so thankful!'

Mrs Carlingford looked at Nina almost in surprise. For a moment it had seemed, owing to Rosaleen's fall, as if the race might be a neutral one; but no, Nina had waited for a moment to allow her little adversary to get up. Nina had undoubtedly won by all the rules of war, with all the honours of war.

The elder people now withdrew from the field, and the children found themselves face to face.

'Well?' cried Nina. She went up to Rosaleen, who was standing very white and still, with her arm round Peach's neck.

'That's right,' said Nina. 'I am heartily glad

we are as we were before. It is all over. Rosaleen, you're just a splendid actress; and I am ever so proud of the way you ran and the way you recited. You are so much younger than I that I am amazed at you. I only wish with all my heart I could have let you have the victory; but that, for many reasons, was impossible.'

'Oh, don't speak about it,' replied Rosaleen. Her eyes looked quite big and dark, and her face was still ghastly pale.

'Have you hurt yourself?'

'It is nothing,' replied Rosaleen.

'But I am afraid she has. Peach, what can be the matter? Dear little Rosaleen, sit down.'

'Don't,' said Rosaleen. 'This is not the time. Are there to be no conditions of the peace?'

'None, as far as I am concerned,' replied Nina. She glanced at Kenneth as she spoke; she glanced at Malcolm; she looked at Peach.

The next instant, with a joyful cry, Prudence had rushed forward, flung her arms round Nina's neck, and kissed her rapturously.

'Oh! I am so glad—I am so glad I have got my friend once more,' she said. 'Oh Rose! don't look sulky; we are all glad—aren't we?'

'We're all glad—aren't we?' repeated Rosaleen in a strained voice. She did not say any more.

'I think I'll go back to the house,' she said; 'I did give my knee a little knock.'

'Then I'll go with you, Rose,' cried Peach.

'No, thank you, Peach. I would rather Amy came.'

This was the very last thing Amy desired. She had hoped, indeed, that the evening so full of important issues would end in a really jolly time, when the children who had so long been in a state of strain might feel happy and at rest, and at home with each other once more; but Rosaleen had an imperious way, and there was a pathetic expression in her dark eyes. There was nothing for it, therefore, but to say with a sigh:

'Very well, if you really wish it, Rose. I suppose you will come back again?'

'I don't think so; not to-night,' replied Rosaleen. 'I acknowledge that I was beaten, and that you did everything very well, Nina.'

'And the fight is at an end; don't forget that,' said Nina.

'The fight is at an end,' repeated Rosaleen, still in that half-vacant way, as if she did not mean what she was saying. She left the field, limping a good deal and leaning heavily on Amy.

Nina turned and looked at the others.

'I do wish something would make the poor little

thing happy again,' she said. 'She is a very difficult child to understand; but look here, I mean to take her in tow. I am certain I can win her heart yet.'

'You have not won it up to the present,' answered Patience. 'Oh dear, how thankful I am! Rosaleen was forced into a most unnatural position. We were not able to tell our father and mother, and you, Nina, were not able to tell your mother; and the whole thing was so bad. Now she will feel, however cross she may be for a day or two, that she is just nothing but an ordinary little girl, and will get to know her place. The best person to be with her to-night is our practical Amy; she never could show off much before Amy, for Amy would not go into heroics for any one.'

'Let's sit down and have a jolly chat,' said Prudence, touching Kenneth on the shoulder. 'You have no end of things to tell me. Let us walk about the field, if you prefer it, and talk.'

The next moment Prudence and Ken were walking quietly up and down; Nina and Patience followed suit; and the other three—Malcolm, Fred, and Peach—brought up the rear. How merrily they talked! How fast their tongues wagged! How many things they had to confide to each other! This examination which went so successfully, the

death of that white mouse, the cruel end of the white fantail pigeon—all the things which make up the life of happy, healthy children had to be discussed without end.

It was late when they got back to the house. They went to bed, too tired to talk much, and were soon sunk in happy dreams. Yes, the great, great fight was at an end; so they thought. But, alas! how little they knew!

Rosaleen had gone quietly up to bed with Amy. Amy had then bathed Rosaleen's poor wounded knee and skilfully bandaged it.

'You must get into bed,' she said. 'You really must, Rosaleen.'

Rosaleen did not reply. She stood and stared out of the window.

'I am not going to let my knee interfere with me,' she remarked. 'I have a great deal to do.'

'You do look queer,' said Amy. 'Are you awfully sorry that the great fight is over?'

'Sorry? No,' said Rosaleen. 'Why should I be sorry? I meant to win, but I failed. It was horrid mean of Nina to take advantage of my fall.'

'But she didn't. Oh Rose! how can you? She quite stopped until you got up again; and it was awfully difficult to get a fresh spurt up.'

'How could I run properly when I was shaken all

to pieces,' cried Rosaleen, 'and my head so giddy with the pain?'

'Oh, I know you're as plucky as anything; but really Nina did win. In any case, she said the "Revenge" better than you said the "One-Hoss Shay."'

'Don't let us talk about it,' said Rosaleen. 'She's won, and she thinks the fight is over.'

'Of course it is over. It was arranged that it was to be over—that this was to be the end; and she was awfully generous not to impose any conditions. Would you have been as generous, Rosaleen?'

'No,' said Rosaleen, with a queer smile, and a look of mischief filling her eyes. 'My conditions would have made 'em sit up, I can tell you.'

'Well, I am glad the fight is over.'

Rosaleen turned and flashed a fiery glance at Amy.

'What a poor, small, pale sort of thing you are!' she said. 'I'm 'shamed of having you for a sister. Do you think, 'cos the fight is over, that I'm going to be friends with her? I hate her down deep in my heart; and she shall know it—she shall know it.'

Here Rosaleen burst into stormy weeping. Amy was not greatly surprised. She knew her sister; she knew these fits of mad impetuosity. There was

nothing for it but to allow the girl to have her own way.

'I wouldn't go on crying if I were you,' she said after a pause. 'Your eyes will be so red when you go down to breakfast in the morning; they'll all think that you're awfully put out.'

'I didn't think about my eyes; they mustn't be red,' replied Rosaleen. 'That would never do. Nina is not to think that I care. I'll be as larky as possible, and as cheerful as possible, and I'll—— But I hate her all the same. I'——

'Come, come; don't talk any more nonsense,' said Amy. 'If you do I'll begin to do my spelling. There's nothing keeps you so quiet as that.'

'Anything rather than that!' exclaimed the Dark Rosaleen. She allowed Amy to undress her; she was very fond of making Amy her slave. Then she laid her head on her pillow, shut her eyes, and pretended to be asleep. Her quiet breathing quite assured Amy on that point. She herself looked regretfully and sadly out of the window. They had gone away so early from the field. Would it not be lovely to go back again; to kiss Fred and tell him that now she could really be his half-twin; to walk between Fred and Peach and listen to their talk just as she used to do before the great fight began? But no; already they were coming back from the

field; they were all tired. Their voices floated up to her through the open window—their happy voices—Nina talking to Prudence; Malcolm, Kenneth, Patience, and the two younger ones following in the rear. They entered the house and dispersed to their several rooms.

Amy did not know whether she was glad or sorry. She was tired. The day had been one of great excitement. Rosaleen was sound asleep; she also would go to bed. Amy was the sort of proper little girl who brushes her hair neatly every night, who plaits it in a long pigtail, and lies down calm and peaceful, having said her prayers, read her little book of devotion, and done all that a good little girl should. She looked sweet and peaceful now in her sleep, and she slept right through the night without waking. She never knew, she never guessed, that at cockcrow Rosaleen had opened her eyes and glanced quickly round her. Amy was asleep—so far so good. How about her knee? It felt stiff; it hurt a little even as she lay in bed. She thought of the victory which so nearly had been hers; she thought of the defeat which she had really undergone; she thought of the dreadful time before her when she was to pretend to be merry, with rage in her heart—when she was to pretend to love one whom she hated.

'For the fight is not over,' thought the Dark Rosaleen. 'It is not over; there is only just a truce. They think it is over, but it is not; and I hate her—I hate her!'

These angry thoughts kept recurring again and again to the unhappy child. Presently a memory came to her; it was a queer and exciting memory. She herself last night—she, Rosaleen, the Dark Rosaleen, the soul of honour, the soul of bravery—had absolutely stolen a sovereign from her father. It had dropped from his pocket, and she had slipped it into her own. Oh, how mean she really was! She flushed crimson, and then turned away as the thought of that sovereign weighed down upon her aching heart. At the moment she had felt nothing; the wild desire of possession had seized her, and she had yielded to the swift temptation with scarce a thought. Now her course was clear and plain. At the earliest possible moment she must see her father, and tell him what she had done. She could not—no, she could not remain a thief another moment. That was the straw too much.

'I couldn't even hate Nina if I was a thief,' thought the child. 'How mad I must have been last night! The very first thing I must do is to return the sovereign to my own darling father.'

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SPELLING LESSON.

ROSALEEN was far too restless to sleep any more. Presently she put her feet out of bed and began slowly to dress herself. Her knee was very stiff and sore. She felt inclined for a moment to awaken Amy, and ask her to bathe it and dress it over again; but she refrained, not from any consideration for her little sister, but because, as she said to herself, she would be no end of a bother, 'questioning me ever so much as to why I was getting up so early.'

Accordingly she managed to bathe her knee, put on some fresh dressing, and then proceeded with her toilet. The stiffness in her knee, however, prevented her being as light and quick in her movements as she generally was; and as she was leaving the room Amy turned in her sleep, opened her blue eyes, and stared full at her.

'Why, what o'clock is it?' cried the little girl 'Is it breakfast-time?'

'No, no,' answered Rosaleen; 'go to sleep again.'

'But what are you doing?'

'Nothing. Go to sleep.'

'But, please, Rosaleen, what are you doing?'

'I'm not going to tell you what I am doing. You can see for yourself that I am up, that I am on my feet, and that I'm going out of the room. Good-bye, sweet sleep. Don't worry me.'

Rosaleen slammed the door after her. Amy, for a moment, felt inclined to follow her.

'What is she up to now?' she thought. 'She is a very queer girl; she looked very queer when she spoke. Why, good gracious! it's not five o'clock yet. What can she be doing at this hour?'

But Amy, lying back on her soft downy pillows, fell asleep once more. She forgot Rosaleen in a land of dreams, and Rosaleen went on her own wilful way unchecked. While dressing she had thought again of the sovereign, and of the confession which she must make to her father. She was a great deal too proud a child to make confession easy, and as she put on her things, as she herself expressed it, quite squirmed over the idea.

'I can't do it,' she said to herself as she got on to the landing. 'I can't possibly tell him. Oh, good

thought! I'll slip into his dressing-room and put the sovereign back into his waistcoat-pocket. He will never know then that he dropped it, and I need not tell, for I haven't been a thief; I'll only just have kept father's sovereign for him for a night—that's all.'

She went very slowly downstairs. It was difficult to do so without making a noise; for to hop on one leg—and Rosaleen's movements were little more than that just now—was not the most quiet motion in the world. Still, she managed to get to the dressing-room door, and was just about to go in, when she heard a distinct noise of some one moving about within. Was her father up? What induced him to rise so early? How troublesome of him!

Rosaleen fled down the passage like a guilty creature. He would suspect her; he would know the very worst if he saw her lingering outside his door at that hour. She flew downstairs. She knew a little window by which she could get into the sweet, fresh morning air; she opened it softly, scrambled out, and stood trembling and panting on the gravel sweep. Was it possible that her father, who had so inconveniently, inconsiderately determined to get up on that special morning—was it possible that he too would seek the outside air, would find her, and question her?

Nothing of the sort. Dr Frere had got up to write some important letters which he wanted to send away by the early post. He had not heard Rosaleen's limping step in the passage outside, and knew nothing whatever of her close vicinity. Having finished his toilet, he went downstairs to his study. Rosaleen, therefore, had the field quite to herself. She looked to right and left of her, and then walked slowly and painfully in the direction of the copse. She felt, somehow, as if she must be safe within the shelter of the close-growing trees. It took her some time to reach it, and her knee was now very painful. She was just about to go in, to sit down on the grass and think what her next step should be, when she heard a voice call her name; and, looking up, she saw the brilliant face and gay, laughing eyes of Floribel Jones. Yes, the Queen of the Gipsies, the person whose post she, Rosaleen, so earnestly desired to occupy, was standing close to her. Floribel looked lovely. She was dressed picturesquely, with a many-coloured scarf twisted round her neck, and a white chemisette below it, and quantities of beads round her throat. She was in the gayest, most gala costume; and Rosaleen, who had seen her several times since her first interview, exclaimed suddenly:

'What are you so gay for, Floribel? What is the matter?'

'We are all going to the fair at Atherley,' replied Floribel. 'Don't you know? There is to be a great fair held there—one of the greatest fairs in the whole of England. It is held for three days once a year, and we are going there; I and Hepsibah Lee, and Michael Smith and Rodney Paget—we four are all to go. We are going in the cart, and the cart is ever so gay; and I am going to tell fortunes. I just thought maybe you'd like to come with us, missy. I said so to Mother Hepsibah last night, and she told me to run round and see if you were anywhere in sight. I would have thrown gravel at your window, missy; but I was afraid of waking the other little miss.'

'Oh, but are you really going?' said Rosaleen, her eyes flashing, her teeth showing in vivid smiles, the crimson colour of excitement and hope filling her cheeks.

'Why, yes, of course we are. I'll earn a lot of money telling fortunes; and we take things to sell —all kinds of beads, and things of that sort. We have a very good time at the fair; there's no end of fun there. There's the lady with the two heads, and the talking pig, and the piping bullfinches, and —and, oh! no end of things. There's the man with the snakes, too. He's quite wonderful; he charms 'em with music, and you might take one of them up

and wrap it round your neck, and it wouldn't bite you. You'd like to come—wouldn't you, missy?'

'Oh, wouldn't I?' said Rosaleen.

'Well, then, here you are. Mother Hepsibah has taken a fancy to you, and so have I. You can come along with me now.'

'Oh, but, Floribel, Floribel,' cried the child, 'what will they say to me at home? You know they will never, never give me leave.'

'Well, you take French leave,' said Floribel.

'What is that?' asked Rosaleen.

'French leave, my dear? Well, it's no leave at all; it's just off you are, and you have all the fun; and, why, when you come back again, the least you can do is to go through your bad half-hour. They can but punish you, and then of course they'll forgive you.'

'That's true enough,' replied Rosaleen. She stood reflecting, poising herself first on one leg and then on the other.

'My knee hurts me a good bit,' she said. 'I went through great trouble last night. I lost, Floribel; I lost.' Tears dimmed the bright black eyes.

Floribel stooped suddenly and kissed the child.

'What does a thing of that sort matter?' she cried. 'If you lost you will win in the end. I know your fortune, pretty little missy. You are

to wear a crown some day, and the sooner the better.'

'Your crown, your crown, Floribel?' exclaimed the child.

'Well, dear, and when can you give us the first sovereign? If you come and can give us the sovereign, you shall wear my crown to-night.'

'Oh, is it true?' Rosaleen felt suddenly cold. There was the sovereign which would have made her dearest wish come to pass lying in her pocket. She almost wondered that Floribel, with her queer sense of 'second-sight,' could not see it; but Floribel was quite unconscious of the thoughts which were occupying the child's mind.

'I tell you what,' Floribel said suddenly. 'Maybe it's not worth your while getting into a scrape over this; but what time do they all go to bed? The best part of the fair takes place at night; it begins at ten o'clock. Can't you slip away here? and I'll come and fetch you at nine; we'll ride over on the donkey, and be there in no time. Atherley is only five miles from here, and I know a short cut across the moors that will be the best way. They'll think you are sound asleep in bed. Couldn't you manage it, missy? If you bring the sovereign with you, why, you shall be Queen for the night at least; and even if you don't bring the sovereign, you shall

have a right jolly time. There now, I don't want to get you into a mess, and I must be off myself; but shall I come here at nine o'clock this evening, and will you be ready to go with me?'

'Oh! if only I could, I should like it beyond words—beyond words,' said Rosaleen. 'I will try, I will try. You'll come back—won't you, dear, dear, darling Floribel?'

'To be sure I will, dear little missy. You're a bonny little thing, and I would do more than that for you. Now I must go. You'll meet me in the copse at nine o'clock sharp? I'll wait for you till a quarter past; if you're not there at a quarter past, why, I must go without you?'

'And when shall I be home again?'

'Before now to-morrow morning. You can creep back to your bed. You'll manage it—won't you?'

'Yes, I'll manage it somehow,' said Rosaleen. 'I'll manage it somehow.'

'Then I must be off. Good-bye for the present.'

She disappeared; and Rosaleen, overcome with excitement, and a trembling, fearful delight, sank down on the dewy grass. The damp grass did not trouble her. She had far too much to think about. How could she manage this dear, this darling, this wild adventure? How could she manage it without letting any one know? Oh! if only Amy was out

of the way it could be so easily done; for Rosaleen, as a rule, was sent to bed at eight o'clock. It would be quite simple to slip away down by the pear-tree and across the lawn to the copse, and then would follow a night which would be worth going through a great struggle to obtain. Amy was the great difficulty. What could be done to get rid of her?

Rosaleen, in her keen excitement, forgot all about the sovereign; the sovereign should not bother her at present. Oh, to wear a crown for one night! to be a queen for one night! But perhaps she would not; perhaps she would resist that temptation. No one would suspect her of stealing the sovereign. How could they? If there was an honest child in all the world, it was Rosaleen. If there was a brave, truthful child in all the world, it was Rosaleen. She would not be suspected of telling lies, of being a thief.

She crept back to the house.

'For twenty-four hours longer I will keep the money,' she said to herself. 'I will put it into father's waistcoat-pocket to-morrow morning. He won't be up early two mornings running. It was very wrong of him to get up this morning, for if he hadn't, the sovereign would be in his pocket now; but, as he did get up, he must do without it for

another twenty-four hours. Oh no! I won't give it to the gipsies; but I'll keep it in my pocket. It can't do any harm in my pocket.'

She slipped her hand into the pocket of her red dress and touched the gold with her finger and thumb. She took it out for a moment and glanced at it, looking fearfully round as she did so; then she slipped it back again.

'It does make me feel bad,' she said to herself. 'Perhaps I'd best not have it in my pocket. Oh, I'll bury it under this tree, and then I can take it up again to-night when Floribel comes. Yes, I'll do that; it would be best.'

Rosaleen made a little hole with a small stick, and pushed the sovereign in, and then went back to the house. She slipped up to her room. Amy was now dressing. Rosaleen came slowly in.

'Well,' said Amy, 'you do look excited. What's the matter with you?'

'My knee hurts me rather,' replied Rosaleen; 'but I have had a jolly time out. I'm quite glad on the whole that Nina has won the victory, and that the fight is at an end. I like going out in the morning, and I like feeling that I can talk to all the children, the Odds and the Evens alike, for the rest of the day. I'm turning good, I 'spect, Amy. What do you think?'

'Oh! it would be lovely if you would turn good,' said Amy, giving her a glance of relief.

'Well, perhaps I will. If you are very nice to me, I'll try and be pleasant to everybody to-day. It would be a change to have me a model little girl—wouldn't it?'

'Oh! it would be a delightful change,' cried Amy.

'You can teach me spelling and set me a task in English history. I really don't mind what I do, if you'll do something for me.'

'Oh, what is that? I was afraid there was something in the background,' said Amy, suddenly becoming suspicious.

'I will tell you after breakfast. You shall teach me spelling after breakfast; and when I have learned my lesson and done my spelling I will tell you what I want you to do.'

'Thank you,' said Amy. 'You are a good child on the whole; and you won't be cross and disagreeable to Nina when we go downstairs?'

'Oh dear, no! dear, no! I'll be quite fond of her.'

'But are you sure that you're honest, Rosaleen?'

'Honest?' cried Rosaleen. She coloured crimson. 'Honest?' Then she remembered the sovereign buried under the tree in the copse, and her face turned white. 'Why do you say that?' she asked.

'Only last night you said you hated Nina. How

can you get all the hate out of your heart in one night?'

'I don't know,' replied Rosaleen. 'Perhaps I do hate her, and yet perhaps I am going to be kind to her. That will be wonderfully good of me—won't it, Amy?'

'Yes, quite wonderfully good,' said Amy. 'There 's the breakfast gong; let 's go down.'

Breakfast passed in high spirits, and immediately afterwards Amy took Rosaleen aside.

'We 'll sit out here in the cool,' she said; 'and you 'll really do your spelling? I should so like you to get a move next term, Rosaleen; and it would please mother so much. You don't know how anxious I am to help you, to be a sort of good little sister to you—you really don't.'

'Oh, don't I know perfectly well? I know better than you can imagine,' replied Rosaleen. 'It is just because you want to be such a precious good sister to me that I don't like you a bit. At least—oh! I mean, of course, I like you. Now then, let 's begin; what I do hate is hanging round a thing. Let 's tackle it; let 's stamp it out and get it done. Now for your long, long, dreadful words.'

Amy settled herself in what she considered the teacher's attitude. She put on what Rosaleen called her 'considering cap.'

'Don't be too difficult just at first,' said Rosaleen, glancing at her a little uneasily.

'Well, then,' said Amy, 'I'll begin with quite an easy word. Spell "scramblingly."'

Rosaleen made several valiant efforts to overcome the difficulties of 'scramblingly.'

'It's a very funny word; it's rather like me,' she cried. 'I'm always scrambling for things; and—there now, I've spelt that. What else?'

'I suppose,' said Amy, looking pathetically at her sister, 'you wouldn't care to learn quite an out-of-the-way uncommon word? It's very nice to know those sort of words, because you can pose as being quite learned. People will think what a lot you know! Do let me teach you one. I came across a beauty yesterday—"scorzonera."'

'What on earth is it?' asked Rosaleen.

'It's a plant,' replied Amy in a voice of withering scorn. 'It is carrot-shaped, and it is an edible root.'

'And what's an edible root?' asked Rosaleen.

'Oh! you are too ignorant for anything. An eatable root. Don't you know what to eat is?'

'Rather,' replied Rosaleen. 'Oh Amy! please don't tell me any more. Do just have common words, such as'——

But here Rosaleen stopped in sheer despair, for Amy, knowing quite well that her little sister was

going to exact a severe penalty from her when the spelling lesson had come to an end, was determined to make the most of her opportunity. So Rosaleen was dosed with such words as 'Yankeeism,' 'zoophytological,' &c. Amy intended to be a severe teacher; she worked Rosaleen quite hard, going backwards and forwards over the difficult words, and finally insisted on the little girl writing them down four or five times.

'You 'll always know in future what these words mean,' she exclaimed. 'You 'll be much more learned when you are able to say to yourself, "At least I know what a scorzonera means." It will make you feel important; it will give you a sort of ballast. You 're awfully wanting in ballast, Rosaleen.'

'So it seems,' said Rosaleen. 'But now the lesson is over—isn't it? I have spelt them all right—haven't I?'

'You have. Now, suppose we do a little history, a little bit of the reign of Queen Elizabeth. You don't know how steady you will feel doing history, and it 's good for you not to be moving about too much with that hurt knee of yours.'

'Not a bit of it,' cried Rosaleen. 'The time is up, and I am going to have a bit of fun now. It 's your turn now.'

'My turn for what?'

'Your turn to do what you are to do—what you promised to do if I learned those horrid, horrid words of yours.'

'Very well. I suppose I must know what it is.'

'But you must promise to do it.'

'If you really want me to.'

'Well, I tell you what it is. Will you go and sleep with Peach to-night? You are very fond of Peach, and there are two beds in her room. Will you go to Peach? You can make love to her, be most affectionate; say you want to tell her a lot of stories, and ask her to let you sleep with her to-night.'

'But why—why? Why mayn't I sleep in my own bed?'

'Because I want to go to bed specially early, and not to be disturbed with you or your spelling, or your plaiting of your hair, or your good little ways. I want to go to bed early, and to have the room to myself, to lock the door.'

'But mother hates the door locked,' replied Amy.

'Mother need not know anything about it. I want to have the room to my own lone self. You go to Peach.'

'I don't believe I can do that,' replied Amy. 'The room is just as much mine as yours; and why should I bother poor Peach sleeping with her?'

'If you don't'—— said Rosaleen.

'Well, what?'

Rosaleen turned and fixed her bold black eyes on her sister.

'I have got,' she replied slowly, 'the most terrible, awful story that I will tell you just when you're dropping off to sleep. It's a story of eyes, and a big, open mouth with great teeth. It's a story that moves close to you, and makes you shiver, and you hear chains clattering, and you hear'——

'Oh, don't!' cried Amy. 'You know I am nervous at night when those sort of stories are told.'

'It will be a dark night to-night,' said Rosaleen. 'A lovely night to tell the story; and I'll tell it to you if you sleep in my room to-night. You'll hear about that thing with the eyes and the awful mouth and glittering teeth, and the chains. Do you understand? Now, will you sleep in the room with me to-night?'

'I—I would much rather not,' answered poor Amy. 'Oh Rosaleen! you can be quite terrible when you please.'

'I'll be sweet to you if you'll leave me this one night,' said Rosaleen, 'and I won't tell you any horrid story; only you must go to Peach and arrange it with her, and everything must be done most private. Peach must not tell that you're sleeping in the room

with her, and you must not tell that you are not sleeping in the room with me; and if—if you do this one thing for me I'll love you so, and I'll do more spelling to-morrow, and more spelling the next day, and I'll not hate Nina, nor nothing. Oh, do—do what I ask you, darling Amy!'

'Well, to be sure,' said Amy, 'it would be rather fun sleeping with her; but Peach is not to tell that I am sleeping with her?'

'No; you glide up to her when she is in bed; that's all. I'll come up as usual at eight o'clock to-night; and you're not to say anything, but just arrange it all with Peach. You two will have a jolly time.'

'We have a great deal to talk over, it is true,' said Amy. 'I will try and manage it somehow.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

QUEEN OF THE FAIR.

DURING the day Rosaleen was quiet. She was quite amiable and agreeable to the rest of the children. Fred sat with her for a long time in the afternoon, and she told him some of her most spirited tales. She avoided, however, the story with the eyes, the open mouth, and the teeth. That she evidently reserved for a special occasion.

Towards the evening the pain in her knee caused her to look really pale, and Mrs Frere ordered her to bed.

'You had better go up immediately after supper,' she said.

Now, supper was at half-past seven, and it was quite easy for Rosaleen to slip up to her room by eight o'clock. The room where the two little girls slept was quite apart from the rest of the house.

They had to go down a rather long and narrow passage to it. It was just in the entrance to the old tower; a pear-tree ran up against the window, and it was easy, more than easy, for an agile child like Rosaleen to scramble down by the pear-tree and drop on to the ground. She did not remember, however, that she had a wounded knee, and could not be as agile in her movements as usual.

When she reached her room she saw Amy there.

'Oh!' she cried.

'Oh! it's nothing,' said Amy. 'I am going away immediately. There, there! don't begin about the eyes and the mouth. I have spoken to Peach. I am going downstairs now; and when I bid mother good-night she'll think I am going back to you as usual, but I am going to Peach. Peach was delighted when I told her I must sleep with her, and she has promised not to tell any one. Don't, please, begin that story. Oh! you are leading me into being a wicked girl; but I cannot stand the stories you tell when you are in your present humour.'

'Kiss me before you go,' said Rosaleen. She went straight up to her little sister, put her soft arms round her neck, and kissed her.

'To-morrow I'll do my spelling,' she said in a low, tremulous, excited whisper; 'and you are a very good girl, Amélie, and I do love you.'

It was so rare for Rosaleen to say words of this sort that Amy felt her whole affectionate heart go out to her.

'I hope you are not up to any mischief,' she said.

'I? What mischief could I do? See how limp I am.'

'You are sure you don't want me to dress your knee?'

'No, no; only to go. If you stay another moment the man I am going to tell you about will come in at the window. He is black, and his eyes are'——

'Don't. I'm off,' said Amy, and ran out of the room. She had not gone many steps down the passage before Rosaleen locked the door. No fear of any one now coming to interrupt her. Her father and mother had both gone to visit a neighbour. Mrs Frere would not be at home till between eleven and twelve o'clock, and by then she would be quite sure that both her little daughters were happy and secure in the land of dreams. There was no one else to come. Every one thought Rosaleen tired, and was glad that she had gone early to bed.

Far indeed, however, was sleep from those wide-open eyes. Rosaleen sat on the edge of her bed. She would not even light her candle. She liked to

feel that the room was dark; she gloried in the sense of mystery that surrounded her. Long before nine o'clock it was really dark—quite dark. So much the better for Rosaleen's purpose. She waited until she heard the clock in the stable-yard strike nine, and then went softly towards the open window. With her wounded knee she had difficulty in letting herself down by the pear-tree; but being possessed, as she was now, by a great impulse, she was more or less indifferent to pain, and managed to suppress a little sharp cry of agony as she finally dropped on the ground. The next moment she was steadily pursuing her way in the direction of the copse. She reached it before Floribel made her appearance, but had only time to secure her sovereign and drop it into her pocket before the swish of petticoats against the thick undergrowth was heard in the distance. The next moment Floribel came up.

'Ah! there you are, little missy,' she said.

Rose could scarcely see her in the darkening night. She held out her hand, however, which the gipsy grasped. The gipsy had a very firm hand, and also a very soft one. It closed round Rosaleen's with a rare sense of comfort. The child clung to her, and felt her whole heart going out to her.

'How beautiful you are, and how I love you!' she exclaimed.

'And I love you, little darling,' said the gipsy woman. 'But tell me, dear, have you got the sovereign?'

Rosaleen hesitated. Yes, it was in her pocket, beyond doubt; but she did not want it to leave there. She had a strange, queer desire to have the sovereign with her, and yet not to spend it, not to part with it. To-morrow morning it should go back into her father's waistcoat-pocket. He had not missed it at all yet; it was strange that he had said nothing about it. But when he made up his accounts he was certain to make a fuss; and Rosaleen wanted it to be safe back in his pocket before that moment arrived.

'I'—— she began, when Floribel said, 'Have you got any money, missy?'—'I—I have, Floribel; but not to spend.'

Floribel suddenly struck a match, with the aid of which she lit a little lantern.

'Oh, why are you doing that?' said the child. 'Why are you doing that, Floribel? We shall be seen; some one will notice us.'

'If they do notice they will only think it's me, the gipsy,' replied Floribel; 'but there's no one here to see. No one comes to this copse at this hour. Now, look me in the face; you have got money, and you haven't?'

'I have got some money, but I don't want to spend it,' answered the child.

'Maybe it 's a sovereign,' said Floribel.

'Floribel, how clever you are! How can you guess?'

'Oh, I can see into your pocket,' answered the gipsy. 'It 's lying in your pocket this moment—a gold sovereign. Let 's try if I am right.'

Before Rosaleen could prevent her she had slipped her hand into the little girl's pocket and had drawn out the golden sovereign.

'Give it back to me, please,' said Rosaleen, making a snatch at it.

'Why so, my love? If you let me have this you will be Queen to-night. Oh, what a time you will have! Why shouldn't you let me take the sovereign, and you be Queen? You know you said that the moment you got a sovereign you would give it to me, and I would let you be Queen. You shall be Queen for this whole night, and—and—— But come, dearie, I 'll keep the sovereign, at any rate, for the present. It is safer in my pocket than in yours. If you change your mind before we get to Atherley I will let you have it back again.'

'Very well. I suppose you must keep it,' said Rose; but some of the intense joy and excitement had gone out of her voice. 'Let 's be quick now, Floribel,'

she continued. 'I have gone through a great deal to come here. I have told a lot of half-lies, and perhaps some of them are whole lies; and I want the night to be very long, and my pleasure to eke out for as many hours as possible. So come, Floribel, come.'

'I am quite ready to start,' said Floribel. 'I have got the donkey at the other side of the hedge, and we'll ride over.'

'Oh, what fun!' exclaimed Rosaleen.

She took the gipsy's hand, who led her quickly through the wood. The gipsy had now put out the lantern, and they walked in total darkness.

'Aren't you afraid?' said Rosaleen.

'Afraid, dear? I know every step of the way. I could walk all over this land blindfold, and never get into a rabbit hole, and never injure myself. Ah! here's the hedge. I'll jump over and lift you.'

'Oh, my knee, my knee!' cried Rosaleen.

'Your knee, poor little missy! I remembered that, and I asked Hepsibah Lee to give me a salve for it. I'll dress it for you before we go a step farther. It won't hurt you any more when I put the nice dressing on it, and it will be all but well in the morning.'

As Floribel spoke she once more lit the lantern, and put it down beside her; and, desiring Rosaleen

to seat herself just beside the hedge, proceeded to dress her knee with some wonderful cooling stuff which took the ache and pain and stiffness out of it before many minutes had gone by.

'How wonderful you are, and how I love you!' said the child. 'You are quite sure, Floribel, you have my sovereign safe.'

'It's in the little bag I wear round my neck, and no one can get it from me without taking my life first,' replied the Gipsy Queen, striking a tragic attitude. 'Now then, here's Jehoshaphat; we'll get on him and be off.'

'Is that the name of your donkey?' asked Rosaleen.

'Yes; he's a very good donkey, and very strong. He'll take us across the moors into Atherley in less time than you can count. I'll jump up first, and you must sit behind and put your two arms round my waist. Here, you cannot mount, with your stiff knee; but if you'll give me your hand I'll help you up.'

The gipsy mounted first, swung her lantern in front of her (which, however, she took good care to put out), and then, holding out her hand to the child, made her place her sound foot on the gipsy's own, and then spring on to the donkey's back. With her arms round Floribel's waist there then followed

three-quarters of an hour of mingled misery and rapture to the excited Rosaleen. Over hill and dale did that donkey go, up hills that appeared to the excited child like walls. Over the broken ground of the moor did he trot, and never missed his footing, and never paused until the twinkling lights of the little town of Atherley appeared in view.

It was a small town, and very quiet as a rule; but on the occasion of the annual fair it seemed to lose itself almost as much as people do in a foreign carnival. All the inhabitants seemed to be awake and out in the streets; and when the gipsy woman, with the dark-looking child clinging on to her waist, appeared riding the donkey, several shouts rose up:

'The Gipsy Queen! the Gipsy Queen!'

In the midst of it all Floribel suddenly pulled Jehoshaphat up almost on his haunches. She turned and addressed a lot of men, boys, and women who were following them.

'I am not the Gipsy Queen,' she said. 'It is this little girl; she is the Queen of the Gipsies. Take off your hat, Rosaleen, and bow to the gentry.'

Not knowing what she did, Rosaleen pulled her little red cap off her head and gave a half-saucy, half-dignified bow. Every one began to cheer her.

'Little darling! Didn't know the Queen of the

Gipsies was so young. What a little beauty she is! Can you tell fortunes, little missy?'

'Say yes,' whispered Floribel in the child's ear.

'Yes,' answered Rosaleen, wondering much what was coming next. 'Oh Floribel, do you mean it?' she said.

'Mean it, little love? Of course I mean it; and I have got the most lovely dress for you that ever was. You won't know yourself in half-an-hour's time. But come, we are late as it is, and the people will be impatient. The fair is at its height. Come, we have not a moment to lose.'

They rode up now in the direction of the gipsies' encampment, where Hepsibah Lee came and lifted Rosaleen with great tenderness off the donkey.

'Ah! I thought little missy wouldn't fail us,' she said. 'Has she given you'—— Here she bent and whispered a word in Floribel's ear. Floribel gave an emphatic nod.

'But I have not, if you mean the sovereign,' cried Rosaleen, in some terror.

'Oh, it's all right, love—it's all right,' said Hepsibah. 'You're Queen of the Gipsies now—our little queen, our sovereign lady, God bless her!'

It was all most intoxicating; it was delicious beyond words. Rosaleen forgot the sovereign, forgot her home, forgot everything but the wild delight of

the moment. Holding Hepsibah's hand, she entered the tent. It was lit by a flaring torch in one corner. There were one or two men present, but at a nod from Mother Hepsibah they retired; and then the most wonderful spangled robe, worked with many coloured beads, was put on Rosaleen, and a white chemisette worn slightly low encircled her pretty neck, and beads of every sort surrounded her throat, and a crown was put on her head—a tinsel crown; but, oh, how real, how brilliant it seemed to the happy child!

'Now you are our Queen, and you shall come and sit on the throne in the very middle of the fair,' said Mother Hepsibah.

She took the child's hand. There was a wild shout of welcome from two or three gipsy men. Some gipsy children rushed up to Rosaleen and touched her hand, then fell on one knee to do her honour. She was led to her throne, and Hepsibah and Floribel stood on each side of her.

'Why, Floribel, you're not half as gaily dressed as usual,' said the new little Queen.

'I have handed my crown to you, dear,' said Floribel. 'I am your Prime-Minister. You'll just do what I tell you.'

'But, oh, Floribel!' exclaimed Rosaleen, in some wonder, 'am I really—really to tell fortunes?'

'Now you are our Queen, and you shall come and sit on the throne in the very middle of the fair.' PAGE 298

'I'll teach you how, dear. I'll whisper the words behind you, and you'll just repeat them. Ah! I hear the people coming. Now then.'

Pretty Floribel suddenly raised her voice.

'Good people all—both men and women, young and old, great and small—the Queen of the Gipsies, who has ascended her throne to-night, is waiting to tell your fortunes. She has great power, and can look into the future; and she will tell you all things belonging to the past; she will look right down into your hearts, and tell you whether you are to be great and prosperous or poor and miserable. But you must each cross her palm with sixpence before a fortune is told to any one. Now then, be quick, be quick; the Queen is waiting. First come, first served.'

A whole lot of silly-looking boys and girls rushed to the front at this moment.

'I cannot tell all their fortunes; and I don't know what to say,' cried Rosaleen, very much excited, but slightly alarmed.

'Tell them any good thing you can think of, love. Don't mention the bad things,' whispered Floribel.

'First come, first served,' she shouted; 'and only one at a time.'

A dark, dismal-looking lad of about two-and-twenty came forward.

'Drop on one knee, and cross our Gipsy Queen's palm with sixpence,' said Floribel.

This the man did. Floribel looked at his palm for a second, then she began whispering certain words into Rosaleen's ear.

Rosaleen was smart enough quickly to learn her lesson. She was soon repeating the gibberish told her by the gipsy to one person after another. At a certain time they would meet with misfortune; on a certain moon they would find money; marriage, long life, and prosperity were to come to each and all of them.

Rosaleen kept on talking; the people kept on pressing forward; the sixpences dropped one after another into the little tray beside the child. At last she turned cold and almost faint. The excitement was beginning to tell on her; the want of sleep made her eyes so heavy that she could scarcely keep them open.

'Oh! I am tired,' she said suddenly. 'Floribel, must I go on saying any more?'

'No; you have been just the bravest little Queen in all the world,' replied Floribel. 'Mother, take her into the tent and put her to sleep. I'll tell the rest of the fortunes.'

She had scarcely said the words before Mother Hepsibah raised Rosaleen in her arms, carried her into the tent, and put her down to lie on a rug.

'But I have not seen the lady with the two heads, nor the pig that speaks; and I have not listened to the piping bullfinches, and I have not seen the wonderful, wonderful snakes,' cried the child.

'You must sleep, little missy. If you like we'll bring you here to-morrow night, and you shall see all the other wonders of the fair. Now drink this, and sleep,' said Hepsibah.

She held a cup of strong soup to the child's lips, and the next moment the little girl was in the land of dreams.

She was awakened after what seemed like a minute by the voice of Floribel in her ears.

'The day is breaking, dear, and we must ride home if you don't want to be discovered. Jehoshaphat is all ready. Come.'

'Oh dear! oh dear! Where am I?' said Rosaleen. She looked round her with a sort of terror. Then she remembered all that had passed. Her heart felt like lead now; the wild excitement of the previous night was at an end. Before she fell asleep Mother Hepsibah had removed the gipsy dress, and the child was once more in her own things.

'Come, come, be quick,' said Floribel. 'I want to take you home. You have no time to lose.'

She helped Rosaleen to mount, and the next moment they were riding out of the town.

'But my sovereign,' cried Rosaleen suddenly.

'Your sovereign, dear child? What do you mean?'

'Won't you give it back to me now? You said you would keep it until the fair was over.'

'And how can I give it you back when you had my throne last night? That was my payment for—— Oh, never mind, little missy,' as Rosaleen began to cry. 'There, there—what is it, love, what is it?'

'But it was a stolen sovereign,' said Rosaleen. 'It was stolen from my own, own father. Oh, don't, don't, don't let me be a thief, Floribel! Do, do give it back to me! Oh Floribel, I am so miserable!'

'There, love, there! I'll think about it. Some other time, perhaps; not now—not now. I have not got it, deary.'

Rosaleen sobbed on hopelessly. After some time Floribel changed her tone.

'Come,' she said, 'none of this. You paid for your right good time with that sovereign, and you have nothing to complain of. If you make a fuss and tell, why, we can all tell where you have been this night. Come, I don't want to be hard; perhaps I'll

talk to Mother Hepsibah, and perhaps she'll let you have it back; but I'm not sure. Anyhow, I have not got it with me. Oh! and here we are. Now, jump off Jehoshaphat, and I'll take you back to the copse.'

Slowly, silently, painfully, Rosaleen crossed the lawn that morning, and with great difficulty mounted the pear-tree and entered her own chamber. She had lived through the wildest, most exciting night of all her life. Surely no night could ever come up to this again. But she was done up; she was wretched. She managed to unlock her door, to remove her damp and untidy clothes, and to get into her little night-dress. She lay down in her bed, and sleep soon visited her, for she was utterly weary; but, alas! alas! she carried with her into the land of dreams the knowledge that she was a thief.

She, Rosaleen—the Dark Rosaleen—had stooped to this! The sovereign was gone for ever and ever.

Book III.

CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HALF-A-CROWN.

THE fight—the great fight—was to all appearance over; the council of war was at an end; the rules drawn up to guide the Odds and the Evens during the sad time when they were not supposed to be on speaking terms were buried with that hatchet which was no longer needed. Peace reigned. The children were happy once more—that is, all except Rosaleen.

The beautiful long summer holidays had come to an end; the children had gone back to their respective schools. They had returned once more to their

town life; and Nina had gone back to the Metropolis, to her hard and yet pleasant tasks, and to the society of her aunt, Mrs Challoner.

Rosaleen and Amy had also returned to school; and as Rosaleen, with all her faults, was a child with some ideas of honour, she had during the remainder of the holidays taken pains with her spelling, and in consequence was moved into a higher class. Amy was immensely proud of her pupil, and encouraged her by every means in her power.

'You are really quite improving,' she said. 'You are not half as wild as you used to be.'

'No, I am not; my spirit is broken,' replied Rosaleen. But she gave no reason for these strange words; and Amy looked at her with a queer sense, which she could not quite account for, of growing fear, for Rosaleen was sadly, sadly changed. Amy could not understand it. In public the little girl still managed to keep up her brave spirit; but in private, and in particular in Amy's presence, she sighed deeply, fidgeted a good deal, but no longer laughed or shouted, or made daring schemes of naughtiness. She was attentive with regard to her spelling, although she loathed it, and avoided the society of her father and mother.

Two or three days after her gipsy adventure Dr Frere mentioned casually at breakfast:

'By the way, children, if any of you see a sovereign lying about, pray bring it to me. I must have dropped it out of my pocket. I cannot find it anywhere. I know I had a sovereign in my waistcoat-pocket on the night of your feast, but since then I cannot find it.'

'I will go and search in the field immediately after breakfast,' said Patience.—'Rosaleen, what are you doing?'

For Rosaleen had bent forward, knocking her head severely against Patience's elbow. She said that she had dropped her pocket-handkerchief, and wanted to find it. She stayed for quite a quarter of a minute under the table, and when she reappeared her rosy face was pale. But no one specially observed her; no one for a moment suspected her of the theft.

The children — Rosaleen with the others — had searched well in the hay-field; Rosaleen, with an aching heart, knowing how empty and vain that search would be. The sovereign was not found; and Dr Frere concluded that some one — a gipsy, perhaps, he said—had picked it up.

'I wish there were not so many gipsies round here,' remarked Mrs Frere to her husband; 'they are quite a worry. Some hens were stolen from the farm the other night.'

'I saw a gipsy—I am certain it was a gipsy,' said

Malcolm—'in the copse the other night; she had a lantern. Oh Rosaleen, what is the matter? Have I hurt you?'

'You knocked my knee; you're very awkward,' cried Rosaleen. 'My knee is still sore.'

Again no one observed. It was quite natural that Rosaleen should show emotion when her bad knee was knocked; it was also natural that she should stop to pick up her handkerchief when it fell.

The holidays were at an end, and the families went back to town; and now the Christmas holidays were looming in sight. The winter had been very mild up to the present; but just towards the middle of December the weather took a change, and cold winds became prevalent. These were followed by a dead calm, severe frosts at night, and then by a fall of snow.

'Typical winter weather,' Mrs Carlingford had said; and she made preparations accordingly—the sort of preparations which children love. There were to be good times during the holidays; there were to be dances amongst their friends, and Christmas-trees, and all kinds of fun.

'It's delicious—isn't it?' said Amy to Rosaleen. 'We are going to have a fancy ball. Mother has decided it. She says she will hire the Town Hall

for the purpose. Mother and Mrs Carlingford are going to do it between them, and we are allowed to ask every single child we like—every single one—to our dear, darling fancy ball. What dress will you wear, Rosaleen?'

'I'll dress as a gipsy,' answered Rosaleen, the light coming back into her eyes and the colour to her cheeks.

'A gipsy!' cried Amy, clapping her hands. 'What a magnificent gipsy you'll make! Why, you look like one already.'

'I expect I am—a little bit,' said Rosaleen, and then she changed the subject. 'Don't let us talk about it,' she said; 'it's a week to the Christmas holidays yet. What about that spelling?'

'I declare you're quite a delightful girl,' exclaimed Amy. 'You'll get a prize—I know you will—when we break up. I have been writing to Nina about you, and she is ever so pleased.'

'What do you want to write to her about me for?' said Rosaleen, frowning and standing still.

'Because I like her,' answered Amy. 'Don't you, Rose?'

'I hate her!' said Rosaleen.

'You—hate—Nina?' Amy made a little pause between each word. 'Are you mad?' she cried.

'No, I am not mad. I am quite as sane as you;

but I hate her all the same. But for her I'd be the happiest girl in the world instead of the—the —the'——

'Rose—Rose, what is it?' said Amy.

'Oh! the most—most wretched;' and Rosaleen fell forward on her knees, pressed her face on her hands, leant her hands on the table, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

She was in the midst of these long-drawn sobs, this fountain of tears, when the door was opened, and Fred Carlingford came in. He was very friendly indeed now with the two little sisters. He called himself their half-twin, and they laughingly allowed him to keep the name. He was rushing in, full of importance. He had an item of intelligence for Amy, something about a party to go skating on the ice, which was already firm enough to hold; but at the sight of Rosaleen's tears he stopped short, and his face grew pale.

'What is it?' he said.

Amy was about to tell him to leave the room, but suddenly she changed her mind.

'Just go and put your arms round her neck and comfort her,' said Amy. 'There is something the matter—I can't quite tell what—but she's not herself. You tell her she's the dearest little girl in all the world. Whisper it in one ear, and I'll whisper

it in the other. Rose! Rose!—oh, Rose! why are you so wretched?'

'I can't never tell you; don't ask me,' said Rosaleen. 'Don't touch me, Fred. I don't like it; you belong to Nina.'

'But what has that to do with it?' asked Fred; for in the excitement of their present life—in the great zeal with which he was trying to win a prize at school—he had almost forgotten the quarrel of a few months back. 'What has that to do with it?' he repeated.

'Oh, everything!—everything!'

'Why should my belonging to dear, darling, pretty Nina do me any harm?'

'Only because I hate her,' said Rosaleen. She turned suddenly upon the two. 'You are an Odd,' she said, pointing to Fred, 'and you are an Even,' she continued, glancing at Amy; 'and there was a fight—a great fight—between the Odds and the Evens, and the Odds won. Through an accident to me, who was general of the Evens, the Odds won; and they thought they had patched up a peace, and that everything was all right; but I tell you that there isn't any peace, and I tell you I hate the Odds—yes, I hate them all—and I hate Nina the worst of every one of them.'

'But you don't hate me?' asked Fred.

'Oh, you're a sort that's only a betwixt; I neither love you nor hate you. I don't mind saying things before you, that's all; but if you think, Amy, and if you think, Fred, that the battle is over, why, you're mistook—you're mistook.'

Fred was so startled that his first wish was to leave the room; but Amy motioned to him to stay. Amy beckoned him over towards the window.

'She's very queer lately, is the Dark Rosaleen,' she remarked. 'I don't understand her. No one notices it much; but she's been queer ever since that funny sort of peace we made when we were in the country. Perhaps it was her knee that hurt her; but she's not the same. She is nicer in some ways, and in some ways she is nastier. I can't make it out. Mother doesn't notice anything; but mother isn't with her much. I am, and I do notice there is a great change.'

'Unless you stop whispering I'll leave the room,' said Rosaleen.

The children turned to look at her.

'Or,' she added, suddenly changing her mind, 'you may go on whispering as much as you like. It has stopped snowing, and I am going out.'

'Shall I come with you?' asked Fred.

'No, thank you—nor you either, Amy; so don't

offer. I'll tell awful stories to-night if you bother me. I want to go alone.'

'But mother does not let you go into the streets alone; you know that,' said Amy.

'Well, isn't there the garden, cross-patch?' and Rosaleen made a face, and the next moment left the room. She ran to the room that she shared with her little sister, put on her warm fur cape and little red cap, and went downstairs. She went into the garden. The garden was covered with snow. She had goloshes, however, on her feet, and did not mind the snow at all. There was a watery sun in the sky, and heavy clouds were coming up towards the north, prophetic of more snow.

'I hope it will snow deep, deep,' thought Rosaleen. 'I could almost wish that I might be lost in the snow; it would be jolly, that it would. It would make an excitement, and perhaps I'd be ill; and when I was very ill—much too ill for them to punish me—I might have strength enough to tell father what I did. I wouldn't have strength enough to do it while I am well and strong; but I might if I were ill—if I thought I was going to die; but as it is I cannot. Oh, what a wicked, wicked woman Floribel, the Queen of the Gipsies, is! And yet she is not as wicked and dreadful as Nina. But for Nina I'd never, never have got into all these scrapes.'

Rosaleen wandered on down the long garden and towards the other end, where there was a stile; she went and leant over it. She was standing so, looking forlornly across the snowy landscape, her big black eyes smarting from their recent fit of tears, when she saw a woman approaching her across the snow. The woman wore a red cloak with a hood drawn over her head. She had a dancing, free sort of walk, and she looked far handsomer than an ordinary woman.

Suddenly the child gave a sharp cry.

'Floribel!' she exclaimed.

The woman came straight up to Rosaleen, and took both her hands.

'You'll catch cold standing out here on such a bitter evening,' said Floribel.

'Oh, I don't mind at all. I thought perhaps you'd come. I've been waiting for you here every evening at this hour for over a week, and you never came; but I am glad you have come at last. Have you brought me back the sovereign?'

'No, dear child; but it's very likely I may be able to bring it back to you to-morrow.'

'Oh, you have said that so often.'

'Well, my dear—well, my dear, we can but do our best. It has been hard times with us gipsies; but if I could get a little bit of money to go on

with I believe you're safe to have your sovereign to-morrow.'

'What do you mean by a little money to go on with, Floribel?'

'Well, dear, we haven't as much money as we had. We have had reverses. If you could get me now, say, half-a-crown.'

'I? How can I give you half-a-crown?'

'Well, listen, love, and I'll explain. If I had half-a-crown to-night I'd sit in the market-place, and I'd tell fortunes—I and Hepsibah Lee. We'd tell fortunes together; but I can't do it without a little money first, for I want to have a table and tray, and I want to sell little coloured books and things of that sort. Half-a-crown would do it, love; and I'd get—oh! a great deal more than a pound's worth of sixpences, for people are that keen to look into the future, darling, that they would give their last farthing to give themselves that pleasure.'

'But you cannot really look into the future—can you, Floribel?'

'You cannot; but I can,' said the gipsy in a calm but convincing tone. 'Now, dear, can you get me half-a-crown?'

'But I have not got a single farthing.'

'Couldn't you borrow it from some one, love?'

'Oh! let me think,' cried Rosaleen. 'Are you perfect—perfect sure that you can bring me back that whole sovereign to-morrow?'

'Yes, and the half-crown too, dear, with it. One pound two and sixpence you'll have by this time to-morrow night. You have but to come here to meet me, and you'll get all the money back.'

'Oh!' said Rosaleen, 'it would be such a comfort.'

'You don't look well, little missy.'

'I am quite well except'——

'Except what, dear?'

'The weight at my heart.' Rosaleen pressed her hand on her heart. 'I cannot have much spirit,' she continued, 'when I remember that I am a thief.'

'Oh, pooh!' said the gipsy woman; 'you run about and play, and don't think so much of things. But you shall have your sovereign back, because I promised you should, if you will only get me half-a-crown now.'

Rosaleen thought for a moment.

'Amy has got seven and sixpence put away,' she remarked aloud. 'She has been saving it up all the term to buy Christmas-boxes with. Perhaps she'll lend me half-a-crown.'

'Of course, love; she wouldn't be a true sister worthy the name if she didn't.'

'Then I'll run and ask her,' said Rosaleen.

She rushed back to the house, and upstairs into the schoolroom, where Amy and Fred, now perfectly happy and comfortable, were diligently pursuing their spelling together. Fred was standing in front of Amy spelling correctly the longest and most out-of-the-way words.

Amy raised her head impatiently when Rosaleen came in.

'Well, what is it?' she asked. 'What a fine colour you have got! Is it nice outside?'

'Lovely in the garden,' replied Rosaleen. 'Amy, will you lend me half-a-crown?'

'Why in the world should I do that?' said Amy. 'You are so careless with your money, and I have saved mine.'

'But you shall have it back to-morrow night.'

'What do you want it for?'

'I can't tell you. Will you lend it? I won't do another word of spelling if you don't.'

'Oh dear, how queer and mysterious you are!' said Amy. 'Well, I suppose I must; but you faithfully promise to let me have it back to-morrow night?'

'Faithfully—sure—sure—sure,' said Rosaleen, emphasising the words and springing to her feet.

'You know where I keep my little savings-box;

take it and run away. Now then, Fred, how do you spell '——

But Rosaleen had slammed the door behind her; she could not listen to Amy's spelling exercises at that critical moment.

CHAPTER XXV.

'DON'T BE SILENT.'

THE schools were to break up on the 22nd, and Nina was expected back on the 23rd. There were great preparations going on in the Carlingford house; but the topic of all topics was the fancy ball, which was to take place on the 6th of January — 'Little Christmas-day,' as the children called it. Invitations had been sent out to over a hundred children, and these had been eagerly accepted; and the dresses that each were to wear, and the guises they were to assume, were the sole topics of conversation whenever any of these happy children met.

The Carlingfords were, of course, full of the great event, and Peach had already written to Nina on the all-important subject of dress. Nina had written back to tell her not to do anything with regard to her wardrobe until she, Nina, came back.

'I have got a great idea for my dress,' wrote Nina, 'and also for yours, Peachy, and the boys; they must dress as I tell them too. We will make a fine show at the dance, never fear. I mean to have quite the prettiest dress in the room.'

Peach took this letter over to Angy, who showed it to Rosaleen. Rosaleen tossed back her proud little head, and said emphatically:

'There's no one will have a prettier dress to put on than myself; and there's no one at the ball will look better than me.'

Peach went back, reporting that Rosaleen now, to all her other faults, was adding that of outrageous vanity.

'She says she will look better than any one else at the ball. Did you ever hear such a thing, mother?' cried angry Peach.

'Oh, never mind her, dear. Little girls of the Rosaleen type often say wild things,' replied Mrs Carlingford. 'Think about your own dress now, Peach. Nina must not lead you away into too extravagant ideas, for my purse has a limit, dear, although sometimes I really think you children believe it to be boundless.'

'Oh no, we don't, mother,' said Ken, looking at his mother with those kind, dark-gray eyes of his, which always caused her heart to beat with a sensa-

tion of satisfaction. He was such a fine, dear fellow, her eldest son, almost taking the place of his father now. She felt her heart ache at the thought of his going to London so soon.

But meantime there were other things, very important things, to be considered; and these were much troubling the hearts of the two little sisters in the Frere household. Amy and Rosaleen had talked for a long time of their presents. Notwithstanding the great fancy ball, the special gift given to them by their parents for the Christmas holidays, presents must appear on every plate on Christmas morning. Now, Rosaleen had not a penny in the world to buy her presents with. She regularly received ninepence a week as pocket-money; Amy received a similar sum. Amy had saved her ninepence week by week, and had now seven and sixpence; but prodigal and careless Rosaleen had nothing.

'I tell you what it is,' said Amy, looking at her little sister, and observing the tears which came into Rosaleen's eyes, although she was far too proud to let them fall—'I tell you what it is, Rose; you and I will give presents between us; we'll buy them out of my seven and sixpence.'

'Oh, don't, don't, Amy!' cried Rose. She felt more inclined to sob than ever.

'Of course, to-night you'll give me back my half-

crown,' said Amy in an anxious tone. 'You will —won't you?'

'Oh, I am certain sure of it. But, there, Amy, we cannot buy presents for every one—the two of us—out of seven and sixpence. I—I cannot give any presents.'

'Oh yes, you shall. I wouldn't enjoy my Christmas a bit if you were out in the cold; and you have been awfully good about your spelling, all things considered. I know that what I find the most delightful occupation in the world is a little tedious to you. You have been good; mother will be so delighted to hear that you are going to have yet another move. You are getting on splendidly, Rose; only I do wish, Rosie darling, that you did not look so sad.'

'I have a great worry at my heart,' replied Rosaleen. She glanced full up at her sister. She was seated on the floor, leaning up against the wall; the firelight danced on her black hair, on her red frock—she invariably wore red—and on her bright eyes. Her little face was thin and somewhat worn; it had lost a great deal of its colour. She glanced up at her little sister. It might be possible for her to relieve herself of the greatest load she had ever experienced, the terrible load of concealed sin. She might be a happy little girl once more. But no; she could not

confess. To-night the gipsy would bring her the sovereign and the half-crown; she would give Amy back the half-crown and slip the sovereign into her father's waistcoat-pocket.

It did not occur to her that her father would be very much surprised to receive his sovereign back in so strange a way. All she felt was that she would no longer be a thief, and that the load at her heart would be gone. She was restless now when Amy spoke of the presents.

'I have it all planned,' said Amy. She flung herself on the floor where Rose was sitting. 'How nice and warm and cosy it is here!' she added. 'It is just the hour when one could have a grand spelling-lesson—without books, I mean.'

'No, no. I have a headache. I couldn't spell a word; I couldn't even spell your name,' answered Rosaleen in the most reckless fashion.

'That is not quite true; and you know it,' replied Amy. 'But never mind; I won't worry you now. Let's talk about the presents. There's a half-holiday to-morrow, preparatory to school breaking up on the following day. You and I must buy our presents to-morrow, Rose. Mother says we may go out shopping alone, for every one knows us so well in the town. We will go to Paterson's, the big fancy shop, and we'll get—— Sit close

to me, Rose, and let's write down what we really want.'

This fascinating employment would have been intense joy to Rosaleen had she really possessed any money herself; but she knew—she had a frightened fear at her heart—that that half-crown might not be forthcoming, and how could she and Amy purchase out of five shillings presents for so many people?

'I tell you what it is,' said Amy, taking out a bit of paper and preparing to write down; 'suppose we don't give any presents to one another. That will leave four people to give presents to: our darling father, our precious mother, and the two girls. We can do that out of seven and sixpence very nicely—can't we, Rose?'

'I suppose so,' replied Rosaleen.

'We'll put our two names to the presents, and every one will know. Next year, perhaps, Rose, you'll have money enough, and you'll be able to help me. But I am so glad that we should give our presents together this year; only, you must be quite, quite certain that the half-crown comes back again, for we could not do much with five shillings. We really couldn't; that would be only one and threepence for each person. You cannot buy much of a thing for one and threepence, particularly at Christmas-time.'

'I don't know,' said Rosaleen. 'I often think the penny things are the best after all. But never mind, I hope I'll get the half-crown to-night.'

'You hope? Aren't you certain?'

'Oh yes, I suppose I am quite certain.'

They sat, their heads touching, consulting about the presents. Amy wished to give more for her father's and mother's presents than for the presents which the two girls were to receive. Rosaleen quite agreed with this. She was not particularly friendly with Prue and Patience just now; they were both too fond of Nina. The very thought of Nina was like a red rag to a bull, as far as the little girl's feelings were concerned. At last she stole softly to her feet.

'I didn't know it was so late,' she said.

'Why, where are you going? Are you going out?'

'Yes; I am going to run about in the garden.'

'It's so queer of you to want to go into the cold, cold snowy garden every night, just when it turns dusk,' said Amy.

'Oh, I like it,' answered Rosaleen. 'I am always a free and wild sort, and the garden soothes me.'

'May I come with you?'

'If you dare!' exclaimed Rosaleen. She turned and flashed her eyes at her little sister, and doubled up her small brown hand.

'How fierce you get all of a sudden, and I have been so awfully kind to you!' said Amy in an injured tone.

'Oh! I am sorry, I am sorry, Amy. I hope you will just be patient with me, for I am that bothered,' replied Rosaleen in a voice of contrition.

'Won't you tell me what's worrying you? Any one can see that you are worried.'

'Oh, can they? Do you think people suspect? Do they look at me much? Do they think that I have got a secret?'

'People have no time to look at you much,' said Amy. 'You're no more than anybody else. It's terrible that you are so conceited; but if people had time to look at you,' she continued, 'they would see that you are weighed down by a horrid secret. I expect you've done something wrong, and that you're in no end of a fright.'

'Oh no, no!' cried Rosaleen. 'How horrid of you to have thoughts like that about your own sister! I won't talk to you any more. I'm going out into the garden to cool myself.'

'Cool yourself, indeed!' said Amy. 'You are queer.'

Rosaleen left the room. She was too excited and too anxious on this occasion to remember her little fur cloak and red cap. The fire, a big one, had made

her cheeks hot, and the fire of anxiety in her heart had also contrived to render her feverish. She ran downstairs in her slippers, and out into the snowy garden. There was a slight thaw, and the paths were wet. Rosaleen thought nothing of this. The sharp, stinging air was refreshing to her cheeks. She ran wildly, pantingly, up to the spot where Floribel ought to be waiting for her. She did not know what part of the town Floribel was to be found in; she only knew that she was to tell fortunes in the market-place. She had told her so last night, and now she was coming back to Rosaleen laden with her spoils. Oh, of course, often as she had failed the child, she would not fail her now—that was certain.

Rosaleen ran up to the stile and leant over it. It was a dark night; there was no moon, but she could see a little way across the snowy field. Any moment she might hear the quick, dancing step of the graceful gipsy girl. Her heart was beating hard. She peered with all her might into the darkness. This time, surely, Floribel would not fail her. She had got her half-crown; she would earn the sovereign back again; she would bring the one pound two and six to-night.

'Floribel!' said the child softly under her breath. 'Floribel!' she continued a little louder; but no

an echo answered back Rosaleen's words. No Floribel was coming to meet her. After a time, feeling absolutely reckless, she climbed over the stile and jumped down into the field; she ran across it a little way, still peering into the darkness and looking in vain for Floribel. Floribel did not come; and now disappointment, pain, and anxiety made Rosaleen remember that she was cold and her feet wet. She went slowly back to the house, a very miserable little girl indeed.

She had sufficient strength of mind to go up to her room, change her wet shoes and stockings, and put on another frock; then, very unwillingly, she joined Amy in the schoolroom. The lamp was burning brightly; the red curtains were drawn round the windows; the white Persian cat was purring on the hearthrug; there was a brilliant fire in the grate. Amy was seated at the centre table, busily preparing her themes for the next day. She had her French dictionary near her, and was murmuring little words to herself. Her fair, neatly-kept hair was falling over her face. She just looked up as Rosaleen came in.

'How late you are! Are you cool at last?' she said. 'Oh, good gracious! Why, your cheeks are as white as they were red when I last saw them. You must have taken an awful chill.'

'I am a bit cold; but take no notice,' replied Rosaleen. 'Go on with your horrid lessons, and leave me alone.'

'Have you got my half-crown?' asked Amy. 'You're in a very nasty humour, and I don't want to worry you; but have you got my half-crown?'

'No, I've not. I 'spect I'll never get it now. I 'spect it's lost as lost can be,' said Rosaleen.

She spoke in a most sombre tone, kneeling down as she did so, and spreading out her hands to the blaze.

It took a great deal to arouse Amy; in fact, no one before had seen this very model little girl in a passion. But now Rosaleen's taunting words, the remembrance of her own generosity with regard to the money she had saved so carefully, and the cruel fact that one-third of that little sum was gone, as Rosaleen had expressed it, for ever, were all too much for poor Amy's equanimity. She sprang to her feet, rushed towards Rosaleen, and, clasping her by the shoulders, shook her violently.

'You are bad; you are horrid,' she cried. 'I can't think what you're made of. Are you a thief? Did you steal my half-crown?'

'No, I didn't steal it; I borrowed it. But I expected to get it back. It hasn't come.'

'Is it really, really lost? Oh! please, Rose, don't

tell me that it is lost. Oh! I have saved it up so hard. Rose! Rose!'

'I am sorry. I am awfully miserable,' replied Rosaleen. 'But it's lost. There! you may scold me as much as you like. Begin; I am ready to listen.'

She sank down on the floor near the fire, and turned her face towards Amy.

'You can begin; you can go on; you can scold, scold, scold. If you do it too long I'll shut up my ears; but if you do it just for a little time I'll listen. Now begin.'

'Oh! you're hopeless,' answered Amy. 'I declare I'd be better without a sister.'

She went back again to her lessons, and began murmuring the words of her French translation aloud.

No punishment could be more severe to Rosaleen than this. She would have almost enjoyed seeing Amy dance up and down, white with passion, and hearing her angry words; but for her little sister, the little sister whom she really loved, to say that she would rather have no sister at all than her, and for that little sister then to go calmly back to her books, was too much for the excited, wilful child. She sprang up, rushed towards Amy, and, taking her French exercise, flung it on the floor.

'Oh, you are too prim for anything!' she cried.

'You shall—you must—speak to me. Shut up your books and talk to me. I'll go mad if you don't. Talk to me; be cross; be anything but stiff, stiff, silent, silent. Don't be proper; don't be good; get into a passion; strike me if you will. Only, don't be silent.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

'LET'S FIND THE SILLIEST SHOP.'

HE next day Rosaleen had a bad cold; her throat was sore and she had shivering fits. The doctor came and pronounced the little girl highly feverish. He said she must have caught a chill, and ordered her to stay in bed. Rosaleen was quite glad of that. She had given up almost all hope now of getting the half-crown back; and, as to the sovereign, of course that was completely lost. If Floribel could fail her once she would fail her again. Rosaleen was glad to turn her face to the wall; to tell her mother and Amy, and Prue and Patience, that her eyes ached, and she liked to stay in the dark.

Towards evening, however, she was better; her headache left her; the feverishness went down But in proportion did the anguish of her poor little soul

increase in intensity. This was the day when she and Amy were to have bought their presents together. What a wretched, wretched day it had been for her! In the morning Amy had sat by her bedside and read her a story. It was rather a dull book; but Rosaleen pretended to listen. She kept her back to Amy all the time; and Amy read on page after page, just as if Rosaleen were the best little sister in the world, instead of, as the little girl was forced to own, one of the very worst. But in the afternoon Amy did not come to her at all; and then Rosaleen began to miss her. Old nurse sat by her bedside, and nurse was dull company. She had been a very good nurse in her day; but she was almost past work now, and did little or nothing for the children. She was deaf, too; and to Rosaleen's most pungent and caustic remarks her only answer was, 'Eh?—eh? What folly you are talking! Stay quiet; stay quiet, love.' There was not the least good in flying out into a passion in the presence of a deaf woman who said, 'Eh?—eh? What folly you're talking!'

Rosaleen was quite relieved, therefore, when Amy came in about five o'clock. She had several little parcels in her hand.

'You can go now, nursy,' shouted Amy in the old woman's ear. Accordingly nurse hobbled to her feet, picked up her knitting, and left the room.

'Are you really better, Rosaleen?' said Amy.

'Oh yes, I expect I am a lot,' answered Rosaleen. 'What are those parcels?'

'Our presents,' whispered Amy.

'Our presents? You don't mean to say you'll let me go halves now?'

'Why not? You didn't mean to lose that half-crown.'

'Oh, indeed, indeed, indeed I didn't! Oh Amy, you are a kind girl.'

'I have not got as nice things as I meant to,' said Amy. 'Perhaps I'd best lock the door; we can open them then, and look at them.'

'Oh! do; let's,' cried Rosaleen. 'That will be quite lovely.'

Amy accordingly tiptoed across the room, and turned the key in the lock; then, having supplied Rosaleen with a dressing-gown, she helped her to sit up in bed, and even went the length of allowing her to open some of the parcels. It was so fascinating to slowly untie that string, to lay it on the bed, and unfold the brown-paper wrappings; and there came little screams and cries of wonder, and 'Oh Amy, how clever of you to think of that! Won't mother just love this little photograph frame! Oh! and nail-scissors for father — how nice! And this little packet of all sorts of sticking-

plaster for Patience; only, why did you get it for Patience?'

'Because she's always cutting her fingers; don't you know that?' replied Amy. 'I always go in for the useful,' she added.

'I know. I wish you were not quite so proper.' Rosaleen could seldom keep back her real self.

'This is for Prudence,' continued Amy. 'Don't you think she will like it? It's thirteen exercise-books; they cost a penny each. I thought she would be so pleased.'

'I am sure I don't know. I think it's rather a dull present,' said Rosaleen. 'Oh, I wish I had money of my own!'

'If we had that half-crown that you lost! But there, it doesn't much matter now,' continued Amy; 'only, I'd have bought pretty things—bon-bons and flowers.'

'I wish I had it! I wish I had it! I long to give it back to you,' cried Rosaleen.

'But don't you think, on the whole, the presents are very nice?'

'Yes, very nice. I love them all. Now take them away; my head aches.'

The next day Rosaleen was so much better that she was allowed to get up. She was on no account to go out, however. She sat feeling somewhat

important and a little languid in the comfortable schoolroom. There a considerable fuss was made over her. Prudence and Patience both came in to sit with her at intervals, and chat with her; and all their talk was about the fancy ball and the delight they felt in the return of Nina Carlingford.

Rosaleen bore this style of conversation for some little time without any remark; but presently the proverbial last straw came. Prudence said something even more exasperating than usual; and Rosaleen, raising her big, dark eyes, said in a low, emphatic, defiant voice:

'I wish you would talk about somebody else. Don't you know—can't you see—that I hate Nina Carlingford so bad that—that—oh! you don't know how I hate her! To look at her gives me pain. I loathe her; I think she is the most hateful, horrid, nasty, disagreeable girl in all the wide, wide world.'

Rosaleen's tone was so slow, so emphatic, and the look in her big eyes so remarkable that Prudence was slightly alarmed. She did not speak at all for a minute; then she bent forward and laid her cool hand on the little girl's forehead.

'Are you sure that your headache has not come back?' she asked. 'You must be getting feverish again.'

'I have always this sort of feeling,' said Rosaleen.

'Don't touch me, please.' She pulled herself petulantly away, and retired into her corner at one side of the big fire.

Prudence went off presently and spoke to her mother.

'Really, Rose gets queerer and queerer,' she remarked. 'I think, mother, you ought to try and send her to school. She ought to get quite away from all her present surroundings. She talks in the most awful way about our darling Nina.'

'Yes, I don't much like the child's expression lately,' said Mrs Frere. 'I have often remarked it—a kind of intense look, as if there were something on her mind.'

'There is, I am certain,' answered Prudence. 'I noticed it to-day. It was quite terrible the way she spoke of Nina.'

Mrs Frere thought over Prudence's remarks, and in the course of the afternoon she went alone into the schoolroom and sat down by the solitary and unhappy little prisoner.

'Would my little girl like to climb on mother's knee, put her head on mother's breast, and have a good long cosy hug?' said Mrs Frere in that seductive voice which none of her children had ever resisted.

Rosaleen, however, began to tremble when her

mother made this offer. She knew well that her mother alone in all the world had the power of drawing her real heart out of her breast.

'If she begins to kiss me, if her kisses feel too soft, if her arms feel too comf'y, I'll begin to cry, and then it will be all up with me,' thought the child. So she said a little stiffly, turning away her head and shrugging her shoulders:

'I think not, mother; not to-day, please.'

'But why not, dear little woman?'

'Because——' said Rosaleen; then she stopped. She sprang suddenly to her feet—'Because I don't want to be melted to-day.'

'You have something fretting you, Rosaleen. Don't you think you had better tell mother?'

'Not to-day,' replied Rosaleen; 'not to-day. Talk to me about anything in all the world except Nina Carlingford.'

'But why should you dislike poor Nina?'

'If you talk of her my head will ache that bad it will split almost,' said Rosaleen. 'Talk of anybody or anything but Nina,' and then she herself turned the conversation rather deftly. She talked about Christmas and Amy, and told her mother with wonderful self-repression that she knew she was going to be moved into a higher class after Christmas, and that she was getting a little

interested in her lessons, and spelt ever so much better.

'It's all owing to Amy,' she said in conclusion. 'Amy is almost perfect. She is the sort of girl you ought to be desperate proud of, mummy.'

'As a matter of fact,' replied Mrs Frere, 'I am extremely proud of all my children. I never saw such a neat, capable, all-round, clever sort of girl as Prudence; and there never was a tenderer companion nor a more unselfish girl than Patience; and there never was a cleverer girl in her way, nor a neater or more model one than my little Amy; and'——

'Oh! don't, mother; don't talk about me,' said Rosaleen.

'But I must, love. There never was a girl who had so much given to her by God as my Dark Rosaleen—beauty of person, beauty of soul—great, great nobleness'——

'Don't, mother; it's not true. I mean, if it was true it's lost,' cried Rosaleen.

'It can never be lost, darling; not while you live. You have but to'——

'What, mother?'

'If you have been going a little bit on the wrong path, you have but to turn straight round, put yourself in the right path again—the narrow way—and all will be well.'

Rosaleen's face turned very white.

'All right, mother,' she said. She bent towards her mother and kissed her—not with her old impetuosity, but quite a cold, chilly, sad little kiss—and ran out of the room.

'Poor child! how am I to get to that frozen-up heart of hers?' thought the mother. She felt anxious; but she would not hasten matters. 'Children are children,' she said to herself; 'each one has her own peculiar character. It would never do to press for Rosaleen's confidence. I am quite certain that things will come right in the end. Only,' she added under her breath, 'why does she hate Nina Carlingford?'

Meanwhile the preparations for Christmas were almost completed. Amy had packed the parcels with wonderful neatness. She had two or three pence over, which she expended on narrow blue ribbon. Each parcel was folded up in pretty white paper and tied with blue ribbon; and Rosaleen, sad as she was, took an interest in these preparations. The presents themselves, however, scarcely pleased her. She wanted to have something light and frivolous and festive to add to the gifts. The half-crown—the lost half-crown—would do this. If only she could get it!

This was the break-up day, and early on the

following morning Nina was to return. Rosaleen wanted to be well out of the way when this great event occurred. In the summer she had borne with Nina; but then she had not done anything wrong. Now her whole heart was sore—sore with pain, sore with the weight of her guilty secret. As she most unjustly chose to consider that Nina was responsible for the stolen sovereign, she now could not bear to look at her. But it would comfort her a little if she could get back that half-crown for Amy. They might then, between them, buy some light, dainty, frivolous things to add to the Christmas gifts.

'Anything that is *not* useful,' thought Rosaleen—'anything that *won't* be any good at all to anybody; that's the sort of present I want.'

Accordingly, towards evening she slipped away to her room. A daring idea had come to her. She was so desperate that she did not much mind what she did now.

It was by no means so cold this evening, and she felt better. Indeed, the chill, severe enough at the time, had almost passed off. There was no one present, for Amy was out with her mother, and the two elder girls were at the Carlingfords'. She dressed herself hastily. Her idea was to go to the market-place and try to find Floribel. If she could see

either her or Hepsibah Lee she might force them at least to be honest enough to return the half-crown. The wild, wild dream that the sovereign would also be given back was too delicious to dare to think much about; but at least the half-crown might be secured.

Accordingly, the little girl stole out of the house. No one saw her go. If any one guessed that she would dare to go out to-night she should be severely punished. She knew her way very well about the town. She had but to turn to her right, to walk down the High Street, to go under an arch, and she would find herself in the market-place. Her dread was the possibility of meeting her mother, or any of her sisters, or any of the Carlingfords. She had gone but a few steps, however, when a voice sounded in her ears. She turned and saw Fred Carlingford.

'Where are you going? I thought you were quite ill,' said the little boy.

'So I was quite ill; but I'm quite well again,' replied Rosaleen. 'Don't people recover? Bah! how funnily you talk!'

'It's you who talk funnily,' said Fred. 'Don't you want me to come with you?'

Rosaleen considered. She certainly did not want Fred a moment ago. But now, to her dismay, she

found her knees very weak and tottering, and her head slightly inclined to turn giddy; and it was comfortable to lean slightly against Fred, and to feel his very sympathetic presence near her.

'If you'll promise never, never, whatever happens, to tell,' said Rosaleen, 'perhaps — perhaps I'll let you come with me.'

'Oh!' replied Fred, 'I'll never tell, not if they pull out my tongue with hot pincers.'

'All right,' said Rosaleen. 'I suppose you can keep your word—few boys can, and you're a Carlingford, and they're such a poor lot—but perhaps you can, just for once.'

'Try me,' exclaimed Fred, enduring this indignity to the members of his own household for the chance of Rosaleen's most fascinating society.

'Where are we going?' he asked.

'You might be a sort of little husband to me for the time,' suggested Rosaleen, 'and let me lean on you. Old-fashioned husbands and wives always go out arm-in-arm. Let us be an old-fashioned husband and wife, and let us go arm-in-arm.'

She said this because she did not choose to tell Fred how very giddy she felt.

'I am ever so delighted,' said Fred, 'to be your husband. Then you're Mrs Frederick Carlingford.'

'Never!' cried the angry Rosaleen. 'I a Carling-

ford! I wouldn't take the name for all you could give me.'

'You must take it if you marry me,' said Fred.

'I wouldn't marry you really; it's only make-believe, you know.'

'Very well,' agreed Fred; 'here's my arm.'

Rosaleen hooked herself on to it, and found it a great support.

'Let's go quickly, husband,' she said. 'We are going to the market-place.'

'The market-place! How very nice!' exclaimed Fred. 'Why so?'

'I want to find a beautiful gipsy lady; her name is Floribel.'

'Floribel? The same gipsy we saw that morning?' said Fred.

'Yes; the very same. But do not talk of that morning, husband. I don't choose to have it alluded to.'

'All right,' replied Fred in a tone of deep submission.

'You know,' said Rosaleen, half-laughing, and recovering her spirits rapidly, 'there's been a new sort of marriage ceremony said over us, and you have promised to obey *me*. See you do it, that's all.'

'Oh yes, I'll do it,' answered Fred, glad to think he was not really Rosaleen's husband.

'When we get to the market-place I want to talk private to Floribel. You can be standing near, but shut your ears so that you need not listen.'

'But that will be very dull for me,' said Fred.

'Husbands, obey your wives and stop talking,' was Rosaleen's reply.

They walked on. Presently they reached the market-place. Being so near Christmas, it was very full. All kinds of good things were scattered abroad on many stalls. Lanterns shone brightly; torches waved in the cold night air; people gesticulated and praised their wares in all kinds of tones. Rosaleen was not taken any special notice of, nor was her little companion. There were many children of the poorer class in the market-place, and these two mingled with the others.

'We must find Floribel. I don't want to see anybody else,' said Rosaleen.

At last they did find her—strange to say, Floribel and Hepsibah side by side—at a very gaily-decorated little stall in one corner of the market-place. The moment she saw her, Rosaleen left Fred's side, rushed up to her, and pulled her violently by the hand, nearly causing her to upset a great basket of red Californian apples.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' cried Floribel. 'What are you doing here, little missy?'

'I want to speak to you, you bad, deceitful'—— shouted the child, her face white with passion, her teeth showing.

'Mother, will you look after things?' said Floribel in a careless tone. 'What do you want to say to me, missy?'

Rosaleen pulled her to one side.

'I was waiting for you two nights ago,' said Rosaleen, 'and I caught an awful chill, and you never, never came back either with the half-crown or the pound! Oh! you are bad; you are deceitful.'

'You had best stop that, missy,' replied the gipsy woman. 'I can't stand being spoken to in that tone, not by nobody. If you want to speak to me, speak; but don't take that tone, missy.'

'I do want to speak to you, and I'll take what tone I like. Where's my sovereign?'

'Oh, love, I have collected some of it, but not all. That half-crown you gave me was no end of use,' said the gipsy. 'I'll have the sovereign for you in a night or two.'

'Oh, how am I to believe you? You have promised so often.'

'I'll do it this time, love—I will.'

'Have you got the half-crown to give back now? It doesn't belong at all to me; it's Amy's half-crown. Can you at least give me that back?'

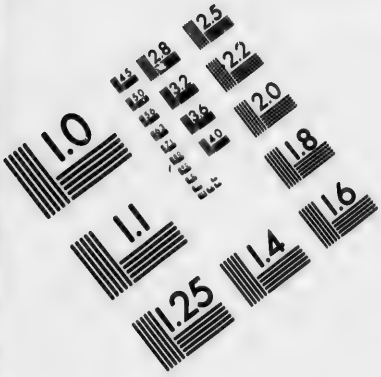
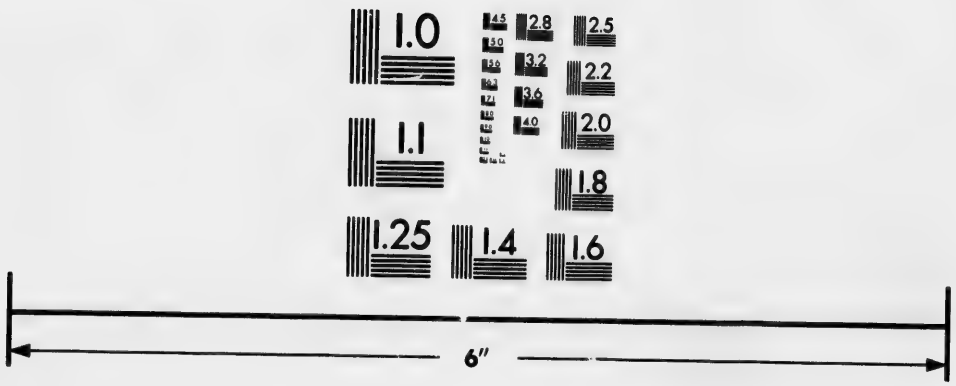
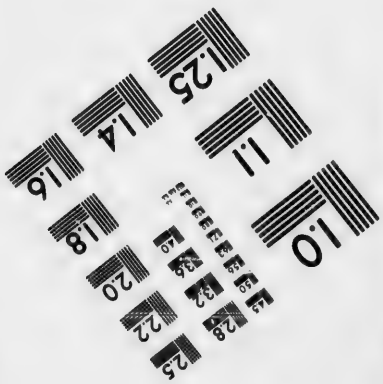


IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (MT-3)





Photographic Sciences Corporation

23 WEST MAIN STREET
WEBSTER, N.Y. 14580
(716) 872-4503

The gipsy considered. Rosaleen was in a humour which was not to be trifled with. She might shout forth unpleasant things and cause the crowds which were coming up presently to have their fortunes told to disperse again without crossing her palm with the fascinating sixpence. Accordingly, after a little demur, she pulled two shillings out of her pocket.

'There, missy,' she said. 'I have not got another penny. It's the blessed truth I'm telling you. But you shall have this, and I'll owe you the sixpence and the pound; and I'll bring you twenty shillings and sixpence as sure as I'm a living woman on Christmas night.'

'But Christmas night is no good. I want it for everything to be all right on Christmas morning,' said poor Rosaleen.

'Everything will be all right on Christmas night,' replied the gipsy. 'Now then, missy, run away. You'll be remarked here; perhaps people will go and tell your mother.'

'The two shillings are better than nothing,' thought Rosaleen. She slipped them into her pocket, did not deign even to say good-bye to the gipsy, and turned towards Fred.

'Take me home, please, husband,' she said.

'Yes, wife,' replied Fred. He hooked his arm.

Rosaleen leant upon it, and they left the market-place.

'What did that queer little lady want?' asked Hepsibah of her daughter-in-law, Floribel.

'She's a very strange little lady, and going to be very troublesome,' replied Floribel. 'It would never do for her to make a real fuss about that sovereign. We might be found out, and the police might be down upon us. The police are precious hard on us gipsies in these days.'

'But what did you promise her?' asked Hepsibah.

'I told her I would let her have the sovereign back on Christmas-night.'

'Poor child!' said the gipsy. 'There's nothing so troublesome as a child when she takes the bit between her teeth. But I tell you what. Suppose'——

'Suppose what?' said Floribel.

'We are leaving here the day after to-morrow, as you know, to go to Orchardson, which is ten miles away. Suppose you were to give her one of those false sovereigns; she wouldn't know it from true.'

'But then we might get into no end of a scrape,' replied Floribel.

'How can she prove anything against us? She'll think it's all right, and we'll be off and out of the country before any one can find out what we've done.'

'That's a good thought—a very good thought,' replied Floribel.

Meanwhile Rosaleen, now restored to the highest spirits, turned and talked to her quondam husband when they got into the street.

'I have got two shillings back,' she cried; 'it's Amy's money, but she has agreed that she and I are to spend it between us. She bought the most important presents all her lone self. Now I'll buy the silly presents by my lone self. Husband, what's the very silliest thing one can buy for another person?'

'I am sure I don't know,' said Fred.

'Let's go into a shop and ask.'

'What shop shall we go to?'

'Let's press our noses outside the wi vs, and when we see an awfully, awfully silly shop, let's go in and ask.'

'All right,' answered Fred. He found this much more exciting than the market-place. Then he had been in the cold, and Rosaleen had looked very cross and not at all pleasant. But now she was her gay, fascinating self again; her teeth gleamed; her cheeks flamed with colour; her eyes flashed.

'Let's find the very silliest shop in all the world,' she said, 'and let's buy the silliest things.'

CHAPTER XXVII.

'A THRILL-DOWN-YOUR-BACK.'

CHRISTMAS-DAY came. It was a very cold day—quite the old-fashioned sort of Christmas-day. The Freres and the Carlingfords were to pass the hours of this blessed day together; that had been the proverbial custom of the families from the time of their infancy. Rosaleen had to bear this state of things as best she could. For instance, the Carlingfords breakfasted with the Freres, and the Freres dined with the Carlingfords; such was the order of events.

Rosaleen was too much excited even to ask to be allowed to stay at home when the time came to go over to the Carlingfords'. She tried to forget, however, that Nina was there; she determined not to look at Nina if possible. Certainly she would not speak to her unless it was necessary.

The presents were to be given immediately after dinner at the Carlingfords' house. Rosaleen had managed to buy silly enough things even to please herself. Amy had been a little annoyed. She had said that she thought Rosaleen's presents out of her own two shillings would spoil the effect of the really useful things the little girl had herself selected. But there was no help for it; Rosaleen chose to get these things, to make them up into little parcels, and to sign them with their mutual names. Amy was too much afraid of Rosaleen, and too anxious about her, to cross her more than was necessary.

Christmas-day came, and the usual routine took place. There was a merry breakfast, during which even Rosaleen tried to forget her woes; then came church, and then preparations to go across to the Carlingfords' for dinner. And there was a great dinner at the Carlingfords', the table groaning with every imaginable Christmas dainty; and, when the feast was at an end, then came the time for giving the presents. There were presents for every one; every one gave every one else something, except Amy and Rosaleen.

Poor Amy coloured slightly when she said that this year she and her little sister could only afford presents for the Freres. Her face turned pale after its flush of pink. She looked down, and tears very

nearly came to her eyes. She did not at all like the position; but she felt she must say something to account for the absence of presents for the different Carlingfords.

Rosaleen, however, interrupted poor Amy's diffident and apologetic speech.

'It 's best to be true,' she said. 'As far as possible, everybody ought to be true; that is what I think. I will tell the truth about the Christmas-boxes. We had only seven and six between us, and the money was all Amy's. I'll say why; I don't mind. I spent mine; I spent it on all kinds of useless things. Sixpence of Amy's seven and sixpence got lost; I won't tell how, 'cos that 's a secret. Out of seven shillings we could only buy for our people; so we only bought for our own people. That 's all. But there 's another reason too. I don't like any of the Carlingfords, except Fred; and if I had money of my own, I wouldn't buy any presents for them.'

'Hush! hush, Rosaleen! You are a very rude little girl,' said her father. He went up to her, took her down from a stool on which she had mounted to make her very naughty little harangue, and, taking her hand, presently drew her to sit on his knee.

'Are you very angry with me, father?' whispered Rosaleen.

'Hurt,' he said—'hurt a good deal.'

'Oh father! never mind,' replied Rosaleen. 'I am good when I am sitting on your knee; but I cannot help my feelings, and I must be honest.'

'Honest, I grant,' whispered her father; 'but not rude. That was a very ill-mannered speech; but I will speak to you about it presently.'

No one at that Christmas feast looked more charming than Nina. Her beauty seemed to increase every time she came home. She was a very striking-looking girl, and her face was not only full of sparkle and vigour and go, but it was also full of nobility and power. More than once she looked almost wistfully at her little enemy. Why did the Dark Rosaleen hate her so much?

The Dark Rosaleen for a long time refused to acknowledge the glances which Nina bestowed upon her. She saw those glances very well, but she always turned her head aside. Nina was wondering how she could break through the spell which divided her from the little girl.

'For, in reality,' she said to herself, 'we ought to be friends. We have a great deal in common. It is strange that a child so much younger than I am should have such strong feelings against me. It is still more strange that I cannot overcome them.'

As the day went on Rosaleen began to think of

the evening. She must slip away somehow; she must see the gipsy woman.

The rest of the family sat down cosily to talk about the fancy ball. It was still twelve days off—none too long for the preparations which must take place before its arrival. Of course, the grand subject of discussion was dress—what dress should each of the children wear?

Rosaleen said in her usual sharp, defiant voice:

'I am going to be a gipsy, and I will dress as a gipsy.'

As this was not at all a remarkable costume, nobody commented much about it. It was the universal opinion that Rosaleen would look very well in her gipsy character. The other dresses were to be more out of the common. Nina said she would be a Snow Queen. She would be all in white, with little flakes of cotton wool all over her, to imitate falling snow; and her long, thick hair was to fall about her shoulders, and she would wear a star of diamonds just over her brow. She would make a beautiful Snow Queen, so fair and delicate was her complexion, so very blue her eyes.

Every one applauded this suggestion; and then Prudence said she would go as Moonlight, and Patience as the universal Shepherdess with her Crook. Fred and Peach were to go as the little

He and She in the song, and both were to dress to imitate china figures. They would make a pretty pair, and the idea was much applauded. The elder boys were to appear, one as Charles I., the other as the Black Knight in *Ivanhoe;* whereas Amy, after a great deal of consultation, announced her intention to go as a little Spelling Marm.

'I will,' said Amy; 'I am determined. I know the sort they are from the pictures of the women who used to keep dame-schools; and I'll dress just like them, and I'll have a page from a spelling-book fastened on my right side, and I'll have a birch rod in my right hand. I'll enjoy it awfully.'

The others laughed at Amy's funny idea, and on the whole approved of her choice.

So the happy hours passed by; and even Rosaleen forgot her anger and her wicked thoughts, and joined in the discussion with the rest. Hymns were then sung—pretty, suitable carols—in the hall, Mrs Carlingford playing the organ as only she knew how. But Rosaleen was watching the clock. About seven o'clock she thought that the gipsy Floribel would appear at the end of their own garden. Whatever happened, she must slip away. She had just reached the door leading into the outer hall when Fred ran after her.

'Won't you come upstairs,' he said, 'right up to our attic, and let's have a right cosy talk?'

'I can't to-night, husband. I have other things to do,' replied Rosaleen.

'But where are you going?'

'That's nothing to you.'

'It is, for I am your husband,' said Fred.

'But you're only my play-husband; and don't forget the new marriage service—husbands, obey.'

'Oh, that's all nonsense,' replied Fred. 'What is up to-night? I see that you'——

'If you spy,' said Rosaleen, 'if you watch me and make any remark, I'll never forgive you, and I'll lead you such a life! At the fancy ball I'll be for ever taunting and teasing you. You don't know what I'll do. You had better let me alone.'

'Perhaps I had,' said Fred. 'But do tell me where you are going? Don't be so cross, Rosaleen. I really wish you wouldn't.'

He had scarcely said the words before Nina walked slowly past. She paused for a moment.

'By the way, Rosaleen,' said Nina, 'would you like me to tell you a story? I will tell you and Fred and Peach a lovely new story which I have just heard. Will you come to mother's little boudoir? It's so cosy there.'

Rosaleen looked wistful for a moment. Nina's

voice had such soft inflections in it. There was something so gentle and winning in it, too; and just for an instant her firm, comforting hand was laid on the little girl's shoulder. But the next moment the old hatred sprang up.

'No, no!' cried Rosaleen.

'Yes!' said Fred. 'Yes! Do come, Rose—do come.'

'I will, if'——

'If what?' asked Nina.

'If you'll wait for half-an-hour.'

'Oh, I'll do that. I don't mind. But why should I wait for half-an-hour?'

'I can't tell you. You had better not ask me. If you'll wait for half-an-hour, and if I am successful, I'll come.'

'Successful?' said Nina.

'Yes; and it's nothing to you,' cried Rosaleen angrily. 'If I am successful I'll come back in half-an-hour.'

Nina's face looked quite sad.

'Of course I'll wait, Rose,' she said. 'I would do more than that to win you.'

'You'll never, never win me,' thought Rosaleen to herself. She walked away; she could not attempt to go out of the house while the others were watching her. But they were all too busy, too happy,

to waste time on the Dark Rosaleen; and presently she was able to slip away, her little red hood over her head and her fur cloak round her shoulders. She had suffered too much from her imprudence of a few nights back to attempt to go out again without being properly clothed. Her goloshes protected her feet; she ran across the street, lifted the latch, and found herself in their own garden. It did not take her many minutes to run to the end of it. The snow was still over everything; the night was bitterly cold. There were millions of stars overhead; the moon, a beautiful new crescent moon, was coming softly up in the sky. The very peace of the atmosphere—for there was not a breath of wind anywhere—soothed the child. Everything was so still that she scarcely felt the biting cold. She wrapped her little cloak about her; the colour flamed in her cheeks from the cold air. She looked over the snowy field. Should she fail? Should she succeed? Oh, if only she could put all things right on this blessed Christmas-night—the night after Christ, the Prince of Peace, was born! It seemed too dreadful to hate any one then.

'If I could succeed, I think I might even be a little friendly to Nina,' she said to herself; 'at any rate I'd be friendly to her for a bit. Oh, if I fail! But, hark! what sound was that?' Rosaleen's heart

beat fast. Was Floribel going to be kind to her at last? Was Floribel going to be really faithful to her promise? Was she going to return the money?

Rosaleen bent her little dark face eagerly forward. Yes, yes, it was true! it was true! At last, at long and last, Floribel was faithful to her word. She saw her coming swinging across the field, her springy step arresting the child's attention, fascinating her eyes. Floribel came straight up to her.

'You have come,' said Rosaleen almost under her breath, 'and you have brought the sovereign?'

'What a fuss you did make, to be sure, about that little drop of money!' answered the gipsy. 'Yes, I have brought it back at last.'

'Oh! you have; and—and the sixpence?' said the child.

'The sixpence too.'

'Oh, you're a darling!' cried Rosaleen. 'You have given me awful pain, Floribel; but—but I love you now.'

'Don't. I don't want you to,' said Floribel in a slow tone.

'You don't want me to love you?'

'No; better not. Don't love gipsies; they're a queer lot. They're not certain; you can never be sure of 'em. You worried me, and I have brought you back the gold. Here it is.'

As she spoke she slipped what seemed to be a genuine sovereign into the little girl's hand.

'And here's your sixpence,' she continued; 'and now I'm off.'

'Won't you stay a moment, Floribel? I'm awfully, awfully obliged to you.'

'You needn't be. I don't want you to,' said Floribel. 'Have nothing to do with us gipsies in the future. There's your money. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye. How queer you are!' said Rosaleen.

The gipsy made no reply. She turned back as softly as she had come. Her figure danced once more down the snowy path, and disappeared into a dark belt of trees at the farther end.

Rosaleen stood for a moment gazing at her; then, trembling, she opened her little palm and looked at the silver sixpence—a much worn and very thin sixpence it was—and the bright gold sovereign. The sovereign was new enough. It looked beautiful; the tender rays of the young moon seemed to gleam on it. Rosaleen had heard that it was lucky to turn your money when the moon was new; she turned her sovereign now, and her sixpence, and she said to herself:

'Oh, I am a happy girl! I am a happy girl! And I am so grateful to God for taking away the load from my heart. Oh, I am a very happy girl!'

She went slowly back to the house.

'It was mean of me to go out on the sly; but I'll never do nothing mean again,' she said to herself. 'I'll always be good in the future—always and always. Amy shall have her sixpence to-night, and father shall have his sovereign back, and he'll never know that his Rosaleen was a thief. Oh, I am so happy! I am so glad it has happened on Christmas-night.'

No one saw Rosaleen go out of the Carlingfords' house, and no one saw her return. She ran swiftly upstairs to Peach's room, hastily flung off her outdoor things, brushed out her hair, gazed for an instant at her bright reflection in the glass, and then ran downstairs.

'Where's Nina?' she shouted in a voice of such glee and happiness that every one started, for it seemed to be the echo of Rosaleen's old voice before the great fight began. 'Where's Nina? I want her. I am in the humour to hear lovely stories.'

'Here I am, darling,' cried Nina, putting her bright face out of the drawing-room door.

'Then come to your mother's boudoir right away, Nina,' said Rosaleen. 'I want to listen to your stories. Be sure you make 'em wonderfully biting, wonderfully queer, and wonderfully creepy.'

'Oh dear! oh dear!' exclaimed all the other children. 'If there's going to be story-telling we'll all come too.'

So Nina, followed by all the rest of the Carlingfords, and all the Freres, entered her mother's boudoir. There was a bright fire in the grate, but there was no other light. This was just as it should be. The story-teller was ensconced in a big arm-chair, and the other children sat round her. Rosaleen flung herself where the light from the flames shone all over her little person.

'Oh, I am so happy!' she cried.

'Happy?' said Amy, looking at her in surprise.

Rosaleen stretched out her hand and pulled her little sister close.

'Don't tell; but I've got your sixpence,' she whispered.

Amy looked relieved. She was penniless at the moment, and even the thought of sixpence was supporting.

'Now, let's listen,' said Rosaleen. 'I'm very happy. I'm going to be awfully good for the future, Amy. I'm going to be better than you.'

'I hope so,' replied Amy, a sceptical note in her voice.

'Oh, you needn't doubt me; I am. Now, please, Nina, make it very exciting; all about ghosts.'

'No, no! don't,' said Fred.

'No! don't,' echoed Amy. 'I hate those ghost-stories.'

'I want an awful one,' said Rosaleen. 'I want to have thrills down my back. That's the sort of story I like. Tell us one of the thrills-down-your-back stories. I won't listen to any other sort, Nina.'

Nina laughed. She would do a good deal to please Rosaleen, but she did not want to frighten the others.

'Let me tell my own story my own way,' she said; and then she began to speak.

She told the story well, and it turned out to be an exciting one; and even Rosaleen was happy. One story was followed by another; and Rosaleen, in her excitement, crept close up to Nina, and before the story-telling time had come to an end her small, thin little hand was lying in Nina's lap. And Nina, in spite of herself, scarcely knowing that she did so, laid her snow-white hand on the little brown one and held it tight.

Was Christmas-night really going to bring the two together again? It almost seemed as if it was.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SOVEREIGN.

ROSALEEN quite lived up to the character she had begun so worthily on Christmas-night. The new rôle surprised every one, and no one more than Mrs Frere herself. She was immensely relieved at the change in the child, who was now gentle and thoroughly obedient. She was industrious, too, and even unselfish. In short, she was quite a model Rosaleen. Her beautiful little face wore a softened air. She often gazed fixedly at her father, and her lips moved. At those times she was thanking God for having taken the awful load from her heart.

But, nevertheless, happy as she was, she had not yet found an opportunity of returning the sovereign to her father. It must be done in such a way that, above all things, he should never suspect

her; it must be done in such a way that no one for a single instant should think that she, Rosaleen, had anything to do with it. That was none so easy, for the house in town was not so big as the house in the country, and the children had their allotted rooms; and as these were holiday times, every one seemed to know all day long what every one else was doing.

Dr Frere, too, was called to London to see an old patient, and Mrs Frere had elected to go with him; and it so happened that the Frere children went over to spend the time and sleep at the Carlingfords'. The Carlingfords had a much larger house than the Freres, and always seemed to have room for any number of young people.

Rosaleen was so gently disposed towards Nina that she did not object to this arrangement, except in so far as it prevented her from returning the sovereign to her father. That sovereign seemed to burn a hole in her pocket. She was nervous about it, notwithstanding her happiness. Often in private she took it out to look at it. It was very bright and new; it looked like a sovereign that had come straight from the Mint. Rosaleen borrowed a little piece of wash-leather from one of the servants, and when she was quite alone, and absolutely certain that no one would interrupt her, she used to polish

up the sovereign until it shone brighter than ever. She knew all about it—all about its superscription—the Queen's head on one side, St George on his fiery steed on the other. She liked to rub her nails along the milled edge of the piece of gold; she liked to read the date, 1894. Oh! it was a lovely piece of money, and it was hers to give back to her father again.

It so happened that, for one reason or another, she was not really able to put the money back into her father's waistcoat-pocket until the very day on which the fancy ball was to be held. On that day everything seemed to turn to wild confusion in the house. The ball, of course, was to take place in the Town Hall; and over a hundred children, a great many grown-ups, and some of the fathers of the different families were invited. But, nevertheless, the Freres and the Carlingfords were busy all the time. They had scarcely breathing space; and Rosaleen, if she chose to make herself useful, was appreciated for her services, but if she chose to absent herself from the others no one missed her.

It was about the middle of the day when at last her chance came. Her father and mother were out; Amy, Prudence, and Patience were at the Town Hall, helping the Carlingfords with the final decorations for the brilliant scene which was to take place that

evening. Rosaleen was asked to go with the others, but she had managed to excuse herself.

'I am a bit tired,' she said to Amy. 'I'll have a lot of dancing to do to-night, so I think I'll rest—that is, if you don't want me very much.'

'You certainly don't look tired,' replied Amy. 'I never saw any one look stronger, nor have a brighter colour; but of course if you wish to be'——

'No, I am not selfish,' interrupted Rosaleen. 'Some day—some day I'll tell you why I cannot go with you now.'

She looked mysterious, and yet her eyes were full of softness.

'I am awfully happy,' she cried. 'Am I keeping up my character? Am I still a very good girl?'

'You have been so awfully good the last ten days,' replied Amy, 'that I sometimes have not known what to make of you. I have been even frightened.'

'You think, perhaps, I am one of those too good girls who die early?' said Rosaleen.

'No; you are not as good as all that,' replied Amy. 'You have only been good a very short time. What I am afraid of is that it will not last, and that you'll be awfully wicked by-and-by—as a sort of relief, you know.'

'No; that's not me,' said Rosaleen. 'I am a very good and happy girl. I am the sort that is good

when I'm happy and bad when I'm miserable. You all try to keep me happy; that's what you three have got to do. You and the Carlingfords had better see that the Dark Rosaleen is stuffed full of happiness, and then she'll be awfully nice; but if you empty me of all my joys I'll be horrid—I'll be full of bad things—full—full—full. There now, you know. Go and amuse yourself; make the hall lovely. Think how beautiful the Dark Rosaleen will look there to-night.'

'You are the queerest little girl,' exclaimed Amy.

'I'm not queerer than you,' replied Rosaleen. 'Whoever heard of such a character as you are going to choose—a little Spelling Marm? And that poke-bonnet—oh, it will make you look so funny!'

'Never mind,' replied Amy. 'It's unselfish of me to make myself into a figure of fun. I am doing it in the cause that I have nearest my heart.'

'You certainly are faithful to the cause of spelling,' said Rosaleen. 'Now then, off you go.'

Amy ran off with her two sisters, and Rosaleen softly clapped her hands.

'Now—now!' she said to herself; 'now, darling, beautiful sovereign! you are going back to father; and Rosaleen—the Dark Rosaleen—is a thief no longer.'

She stood for a moment, watching the retreating

figures, at the window; then she took the sovereign out of her pocket and looked at it, then clasped it tightly in her warm little hand; and, removing her shoes in case any one should hear her creeping upstairs, she went softly on to the floor where the best bedrooms were situated.

The children's rooms were in a distant wing, where deaf old nurse was supposed to be even now putting the final touches to Rosaleen's gipsy costume. The rest of the servants were in the downstairs premises. Rosaleen had the whole wide landing to herself. She looked to right of her—to left of her. There was not a sound; no moment could be better for her purpose. She stole softly into the large bedroom occupied by her father and mother. One of her difficulties in putting back the money had been that the only way to her father's dressing-room was through this big bedroom, and that Mrs Frere was in the habit of being in and out of this room all day long at any hour or at any moment.

Rosaleen ran lightly across it, and opened the door of the dressing-room. It was a small room, neatly furnished. There was a wardrobe in one corner. Rosaleen opened it. Into which of her father's waistcoats or coats should she drop the precious coin? After a minute or two of hesitation, she decided to put it into a black-ribbed waistcoat

ıe sovereign
hen clasped
l, removing
er creeping
where the

ving, where
ow putting
ume. The
s premises.
to herself.
er. There
better for
e bedroom
ıe of her
been that
room was
Frere was
room all

the door
m, neatly
e corner.
father's
precious
tion, she
waistcoat

'Speak out, missy; you were after no good, I 'll be bound.'

PAGE 369

ound.'
PAGE 369

which she had seen her father wearing that very morning.

'It is a warm waistcoat, and the days are cold,' she thought. 'He will put it on, and he will find his darling sovereign, and he will never, never think of me.'

So, kissing the sovereign once with her rosy lips, she dropped it into the waistcoat; then she patted the waistcoat, and said, 'Good little pocket, you are holding the sovereign which prevents the Dark Rosaleen being a thief any longer;' and then she softly shut the wardrobe door and the door of the dressing-room, and ran into her mother's room. She thought, of course, that she would find the room empty, but was rather dismayed to see old nurse pottering about there, opening some of her mistress's drawers, and taking out a lot of old linen.

'Eh, dear!' said nurse when she saw Rosaleen, 'what are you doing, missy?'

'Nothing. It 's no affair of yours,' replied Rosaleen, flushing up crimson.

'Eh? I didn't hear you, love. What were you doing in your father's dressing-room? Speak out, missy; you were after no good, I 'll be bound.'

'I 'm after every good, you horrid old thing!' said Rosaleen, forgetting all prudence in her sudden,

unreasonable anger at the old woman appearing at such an inopportune moment.

Old nurse looked her up and down.

'I say you are after no good,' she repeated. 'What were you doing all by yourself in your father's dressing-room? I'd like to know. You're a little piece of mischief; you're a cross-patch—that's what you are.'

'Stop talking, or I'll push you out of the room,' said Rosaleen, almost beside herself with passion. Alas! and alas! just at the very moment — the crowning moment of her bliss she had given way to ungovernable temper. The old woman had enraged her. She stood turning first red and then pale, looking straight into the face of the old nurse. Old nurse gave a scornful laugh. She had not held Rosaleen in her arms as a baby for nothing; she no more minded her tantrums, as she called them to herself, than if a kitten tried to spit in her face. Moving towards the door, she said in a stern voice:

'You had better come and see if that red skirt is to your liking. Queer outlandish tastes you have.'

And Rosaleen, cooling down after her fit of passion, thought she could not do better than follow her. She went up to the nursery, which was never used now by the children, with the old woman, and sub-

mitted to having her red skirt tried on; and afterwards she sat down and began to talk to her, trying to make amends for the angry words she had used during her fit of rage.

But if Nurse Myers had one fault more than another, it was that of inordinate curiosity. She was not very angry with Rosaleen when she flew into a passion with her, but she was extremely desirous to know what the little girl could have been doing in her father's dressing-room. Accordingly, fixing her with her deep-set, piercing black eyes, she said in a persuasive voice:

'And now, hadn't you best tell old nursy?'

'There's nothing to tell,' replied Rosaleen.

'Oh! don't you talk to me. I know better.'

'There's not anything. Why shouldn't I be in my own father's dressing-room if I like?'

'You ought not to be spying and prying, that's all I can say,' remarked nurse. 'And now, you look here. Don't you think for a single minute that I'm going to be afeared of you. I'll just keep my eyes open, and my ears—what's left of 'em—and I'll find out what's up—so there.'

'You'll do an awful lot of mischief,' said Rosaleen, really frightened at last. 'You don't know what mischief you'll do. You'll turn me into a bad, bad girl. Does that matter?'

'Folly!' cried nurse. 'I suppose I know how to manage children. Haven't I handled them all my days? Don't you talk nonsense to me, little missy. Now then, turn round; I hope this skirt will fit now. I've no patience with those sort of dances, everybody making figures of fun of themselves.'

The rest of Rosaleen's afternoon was a thoroughly unhappy one; but there was worse to follow. She got away from nurse after about an hour, having utterly failed to put the old woman off the scent. Her very nose seemed to twitch as if she meant to smell out that secret before she had done with it; and she went downstairs now, ostensibly to put away the linen which she had mended, but in reality to go into her master's dressing-room and see if there were any traces whatever of that naughty child's mischief afoot. She could find out nothing, and went back to her own quarters more curious than ever. 'Missy had not been herself for some time; missy would not stay away from the fun if she hadn't a deep reason on foot. Missy was after no good.' These were her thoughts.

Rosaleen, however, in the course of the evening, with the great excitement of putting on her gipsy dress before her, forgot even nurse. After all, what could nurse discover? Father had a sovereign in his pocket, which he had not that morning; but

how could that fact be traced to Rosaleen? Oh! surely everything was all right.

Nurse herself came down, and also Mrs Frere's maid, to dress the girls; and Rosaleen made a very radiant little gipsy, with her black hair falling about her shoulders, a row of red coral beads keeping it in position, many rows of beads of all colours round her neck, a little white chemisette showing just below, and then a black velvet bodice and a very full red skirt. She wore black stockings and red shoes, and looked altogether as piquant a little gipsy as could be found in the length and breadth of the land.

Amy was delightful in her poke-bonnet and little old-fashioned dress, with her birch-rod hanging to her arm, and her spelling-book—her sign manual—fastened adroitly to the front of her dress. Amy tried to look severe, and had purchased a pair of spectacles for the purpose.

'I'll put them on now and then,' she said; 'not always.'

The spectacles were made of clear glass, which did not interfere with her vision, and gave her just the comical look which Rosaleen delighted in. Amy was standing in front of her little sister, who was uttering peals of laughter, and was trying to reprove her, when Prudence, in her Moonlight

dress of black net bespangled with silver stars, came in. Amy was just about to exclaim at the prettiness of Prudence's dress, when a look at her elder sister's face caused her to stop.

'Why, what's the matter now?' she said.

'Nothing much,' replied Prudence; 'but father has discovered such a queer thing. He has just been down to tell us. He is awfully angry about it.'

'What in the world can it be?' said Amy.

Rosaleen did not speak. Had that awful old nurse betrayed her? Had she discovered? But how could she? It was impossible.

Rosaleen made a pirouette on her small, pointed toes, and came up to Prudence and said:

'You look very pretty, Prue; but if there's anything of a bother, hadn't we better wait till the morning?'

'Oh, it's not a bother to any of us,' answered Prudence; 'but still, it is distinctly annoying. Do you know that there have been a lot of false coins circulated in the town lately, and ever so many people have been had up by the police in consequence? They are most anxious to find the coiners. They have got no clue yet; and—what do you think?—father cannot make out who has done it. He says it must be an enemy. He put his hand into his waistcoat-pocket this afternoon; he said he

had changed his waistcoat in the middle of the day, but put it on again to go and see some patients, because it is the warmest one he has. When he put his hand into his pocket he drew out one of these false sovereigns. Who in the world can have put it there? Why, poor father might have got into trouble about it.'

'Into trouble?' said Rosaleen. Her lips were very white; she sat down suddenly on the nearest chair.

'Yes, of course. How queer you are, Rosaleen! Aren't you well?'

'Oh yes, I'm quite well,' replied Rosaleen. 'Is father very angry about the queer false sovereign?' she continued. Her voice sounded far away to herself.

'Yes, he is awfully angry,' said Prudence. 'He is absolutely determined to find out who has played him such a horrid trick. He says he is going to speak to every single individual in the house to-morrow. Who could have done it? Fancy serving father like that! And he could have sworn he had no money at all in that waistcoat-pocket this morning. Who could have done it?'

Somebody called Prudence at that moment, and she ran out of the room.

'The carriage will be round directly,' she said as she did so. 'Are you both ready?'

'Yes; quite,' answered Amy.

Rosaleen got up, went to a distant part of the room, and pretended to search for something in one of her wardrobe drawers.

The moment Prudence left the room Amy began to speak.

'What an awful shame this is!' she cried. 'Why—who knows?—perhaps father might be arrested and put in prison for having false money on his person. I don't know whether he would or not; but there are such awful stories about coiners. To think that there should be a lot of coiners here in this quiet little town; it does seem extraordinary.'

She found herself talking to the empty air, for Rosaleen had left the room.

'How queer of Rose not to be more interested!' thought Amy; but the excitement of the present moment was too great, and she forgot all about the sovereign when, a short time later, she found herself whirling with her three sisters in the direction of the Town Hall.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DESPERATE UNDERTAKING.

ALL those who were present at that fancy ball said that it was the most brilliant children's ball they had ever seen. The costumes were original and well put on. Each little character had more or less individuality. The variety of the costumes, too, was so great that the scene was absolutely dazzling; but of all those pretty children, with their happy faces and sparkling eyes and rosy cheeks, there was no one who attracted the attention that the Dark Rosaleen did. Even beautiful Nina, the Snow Queen, was not looked at as much as the little girl with the black hair and black, black eyes, for in those eyes just now there was a wonderful expression, a hungry, sad look, which caused people to glance at the child again and again. Sorrow and remorse had brought changes into that fascinating

little face. The child had always been strikingly handsome; but now a soul seemed to look out of those wonderful big eyes, and the little face was far older and more thoughtful than it ought to be for its tender years.

Rosaleen was universally regarded as the handsomest child present. Soon her programme was quite full, for partners came up to claim every dance. She could dance like a fairy sprite; and when she was whirling round the room in her little partner's embrace she tried to believe that she was as happy as she looked.

'Of course I look happy,' she said to herself; 'we all look happy. But I'm miserable all the time.'

And suddenly, before the ball was an hour old, the sense of that misery became so overpowering that, asking one of her partners to excuse her, she went into one of the dressing-rooms. All the children had come; the dance was at its full height; there was no one in the dressing-room but the attendant. She asked Rosaleen if she could do anything for her.

'A glass of water, please,' said the Dark Rosaleen.

The woman fetched it, and gave it to the little girl.

'Aren't you well, deary? Is anything wrong?' she inquired.

'It's my heart; it aches,' said Rosaleen.

The woman did not guess that Rosaleen was not talking about her physical heart, but her mental one. She looked down at her with great admiration.

'Ay,' she cried, 'I never saw a bonnier gipsy than you, missy. Why, you might be a real one.'

'Look here,' said Rosaleen. She started up and clasped the woman by her two hands.

'Do you know,' continued Rosaleen, 'that I am a person that hates very strongly?'

'Are you, indeed, my dear?' said the woman.

'I am. I have hated more than one person in my day; but of all the people I hate most in the world it's the gipsies; they're a bad, bad, bad lot.'

'So they are,' replied the woman; 'they are a bad lot. I am truly thankful that those gipsies that encamped close to the town have gone off.'

'Oh, have they gone?' said Rosaleen. She became suddenly watchful and attentive. 'How long ago is it since they went?'

'What is it to you, my dear?'

'I happened to know one of them called Floribel.'

'Did you? Then she was a very bad person for a little girl like you to know,' said the woman; 'a bad, deceitful creature she was. Well, they're gone,

thank goodness! They went on Christmas-night. They have gone to Orchardson.'

'Orchardson?' cried Rosaleen. 'Orchardson?'

'Yes, dear. Don't you know Orchardson?'

'Oh! to be sure. We have driven there sometimes in the summer.'

'That's it. It's a matter of ten miles from here, right across the moors. You cannot mistake your way; you can get to Orchardson and cut off over two miles of the distance if you go across the moors; and it's there the gipsies have encamped. They have gone into the town, and taken lodgings for the cold weather. They have gone to what they call the gipsy quarter.'

'And where is that?' asked Rosaleen.

'Just as you go into the town from this side. Anybody would tell you. But there, you don't want to know—do you?'

'Oh, of course not; only I'm interested to know where Floribel is now, although I hate her so much,' said the child. She got up; her head felt very giddy, so she sat down again. She was thinking out something. Her one wild, frantic desire was to see Floribel. She did not know exactly what she wanted to say to her; perhaps it was to reproach her, to hurl against her some of that wild anger which was surging in her heart, to do her a mischief

if she could. Rosaleen was reckless now—reckless and despairing. Just when she hoped that she had put everything right, she had put matters most wrong; and her father—oh, her father!—was in danger. What was to happen? That sovereign must be taken away as fast as it had been put into his pocket. She must take it away. He was at the ball, and doubtless the sovereign was in his waistcoat-pocket at home. Oh, if she could only get it, and then go and find Floribel, and hurl it into her face, and tell her what she thought of her!

To Rosaleen, in moments of reckless passion, no difficulties existed. To do what she wanted was the one thing; an overmastering desire put such strength into her heart that obstacles did not exist. She rose to her feet; the giddiness had passed off; she seemed to see her path clear before her.

'You are going back to the ballroom now—aren't you, missy?'

'I am not,' replied Rosaleen. She looked full into the woman's face. 'I am not quite well,' she said. 'I mean, dancing makes me giddy. Do you think you could get me a cab? I can't walk home in this dress. Do you think you could call a cab for me?'

'To be sure, dear.'

'Will you lend me a shilling, and I'll pay you

back faithfully to-morrow?' said Rosaleen. 'I want the money to pay for my cab.'

The woman complied at once.

'Well, dear, it is easily managed,' she said. 'And what am I to tell your people if they ask for you? You are Miss Rosaleen Frere—are you not?'

'Yes. Say that I was giddy, and I went home; the dancing made me giddy, and I went home,' replied Rosaleen.

The woman nodded. She put on Rosaleen's warm little cloak, and wrapped a shawl round the little girl's head, and then she herself went with her to the entrance of the Town Hall and called a hansom, and told the man to take little missy home.

Everybody knew Dr Frere's house, and everybody knew the Dark Rosaleen. Just as she was driving off she called out to the woman:

'You are sure it's to Orchardson they have gone?'

'Who, dear?' said the woman, in some surprise.

'The gipsies,' called out Rosaleen.

'Yes, yes; it's to Orchardson they've gone,' replied the woman; and then the cab turned the corner, and the ballroom in all its glory and the happy children who were dancing so merrily were left behind, and Rosaleen found herself out in the cold.

It was a bitter night, and the cabman did not ask her if she wanted the glass down. The snow was beginning to fall again, and there was also a high wind. When Rosaleen reached her door she was chilled to the bone; but the determination within her was more fixed than ever. She would not ring the bell, as she did not want any one to know she had come back to the house. She entered by the garden way, found the window through which Fred had climbed, and through which she herself had so often entered the house. The servants were downstairs. Rosaleen ran up at once to her father's dressing-room. The door was open; she rushed in, pulled open the wardrobe with frantic fingers, and found the waistcoat; she felt about it, but there was no sovereign.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' Her very knees trembled under her. What should she do?

Just at that moment a slight noise attracted her attention. She looked round, and there was old nurse.

'Ha! now, missy, I have caught you,' said nurse. 'What are you doing, missy?'

'Oh, I am so wretched!' exclaimed the child. 'Come here, nursy; I must talk to some one.'

Now, nurse could be unkind and sarcastic and deaf and disagreeable and deadly curious; but when

a person really confided in her she could be just the reverse. On these rare occasions she was warm and sympathetic, and, as the children expressed it, cossety. She could take them in her arms and pet them; and now she sat down on the nearest chair, and did just what Rosaleen fairly panted for her to do—took the child into her embrace, wrapped her arms round her, and said in a soothing tone:

'And if old nursy can do anything for her wild Rose, why, she will. You 'll tell me all about it, love; you 'll tell me all about it.'

'Oh nursy! nursy!' cried Rosaleen. She allowed the comfort of the old woman's embrace for a moment, but then she steeled herself.

'I want to get back that sovereign,' she said.

'What sovereign, my love?'

'The sovereign that I put into father's waistcoat this morning.'

'What!' cried nurse. 'Did you put a sovereign into your father's pocket—a false sovereign? Was that what you were doing to-day when you slipped into the dressing-room? You, Rosaleen! I did know that you wasn't what was called a good little lady, but I did not know that you were an out-and-out deceitful, bad, treacherous one.'

'Oh! don't scold; please, don't scold,' said Rosaleen. 'I did it because I could not help it, and because

it meant something that happened a long, long time ago. Nursy, nursy, where is the sovereign?'

'Well, I expect your father has taken it to the police court, if you ask me,' replied nurse. 'He 'll punish you desperate bad for this, Miss Rosaleen. A nice pickle you 've got him into—Dr Frere to be known to have false money on his person. Oh, I am bitterly ashamed of you, missy!'

'All right, nursy; be as ashamed of me as you like,' said Rosaleen; and she laid her head down on the old woman's shoulder and burst into tears.

'Dear heart! Why, you 're not well,' said nurse. 'Come straight into mistress's room, and let me warm you by the fire. Why, you 're trembling all over, poor child! I believe you have gone and caught something nasty—measles, or scarlet fever, or something.'

'No, no, I 'm not. I 'm as well as possible,' answered Rosaleen.

'And what have you come back from that place where they are all hopping about for?' said nurse. 'I don't hold with balls myself, and fancy balls less than others. You made me dress you up as a figure of fun, and now you 're back again. What does it all mean, missy?'

'I wanted to find that sovereign—that false

sovereign. I am so awfully frightened,' replied Rosaleen.

'Dear heart! dear heart! and you have cause to be.'

'Will they lock father up because—because of the sovereign?'

'No; it ain't likely they'll lock him up. But they would think very little of locking up the little girl who put it into his pocket,' said nurse, who thought the opportunity had come to give Rosaleen, as she expressed it, a right good lesson.

To her surprise, however, Rosaleen did not say a word in answer to that. She sat quite still, staring straight into the fire. After a time she said gently, and with a certain new-born dignity:

'I am quite warm now; thank you for warming me. I think I'll go to bed.'

'Very well, pet, do. It's the very best place for you. Shall nursy come up and undress you?'

'No; I would rather go alone, please, nursy. I'm very sad, and I'd like just to be alone.'

'And I never doubted her,' said nurse, repeating this part of the story afterwards, when they were all in such terror about Rosaleen.

Accordingly, without any more words, she let the child go, and Rosaleen found her way to her room. There she set to work with promptitude. She

changed her scarlet shoes for thick boots, wrapped herself in her fur cloak, and put a warm woollen shawl round her head.

'And now I am ready,' she thought. She went softly out of the room and peeped over the banisters. There was no one in sight. Nurse had gone down to the kitchen to recount her adventure with Rosaleen; to throw up her hands and exclaim at the child's extraordinary conduct in putting the false sovereign into her father's pocket.

Rosaleen took the opportunity to slip downstairs, to open the window looking into the garden once more, to step out into the snowy night, and to start on her way to Orchardson. Ten miles! What were ten miles when her heart was beating with such anger? What were ten miles when her brain was clamouring to see a certain person in order to pour forth all the woes of her heart, all the anger of which she was capable, in that person's face?

'When I have told her what I think I'll be satisfied; but see her I must, I will,' thought the wildly excited child.

The woman in the cloakroom had given her vague directions with regard to Orchardson. She had told her that if she crossed the moors she would save a matter of two or three miles. Rosaleen determined, therefore, without a moment's hesitation, to go that

way. It is true she had driven to Orchardson with her mother in the beautiful long summer days; but as to the direction of the place across the moors, she had not the faintest idea of it. She knew, however, that at the end of the garden the field across which the wicked, faithless gipsy had come led to the moors; and she determined to go that way for a double reason. In the first place, she thought it was the right and shortest way; and in the next, no one would see her. Accordingly, with the snow blinding her and the wind beating in her face, she started on her long and perilous journey. She reached the stile, crossed it, and found herself in the field. Here the snow was soft, and her feet sank in it. She almost enjoyed at first the cold of the air and the crunching of her little feet in the new-fallen snow.

When she got to the bottom of the field she entered a wood, a young plantation where larches and other young trees were growing to maturity. She crossed the wood at right angles, and then came out on the high-road. Just then she met a man; he was walking towards the town. He stopped in some astonishment when he saw a little white-robed figure—for Rosaleen was now completely covered with snow—standing in the middle of the road.

'Have you lost your way, miss?' he said.

'No, no; I have not. At least, perhaps I have,' replied the child. 'I want to go to Orchardson. Which is the nearest way?'

'To Orchardson to-night?' said the man. 'But you can't possibly do it, miss; you'll be lost in the snow. There's going to be a very heavy fall. Do you live at Orchardson, miss?'

'I want to go to Orchardson,' replied Rosaleen in what was meant to be a very stern voice.

'Well, that's your road,' said the man, hesitating for a moment whether to prevent her going any farther or not. He concluded, however, that it was no affair of his.

'But I don't want to go by the road,' said Rosaleen, calling after him as he was about to turn away. 'I want to go the short way across the moor.'

'You must not do it,' replied the man; 'it would be madness—sheer madness. Why, there are quarries in that common—two or three; and if you fell into one you'd be killed on the spot. Don't you attempt it, miss. If you must go to Orchardson to-night, go by the road. You'll get there by morning perhaps; and don't you sit down, miss, in this snow, and try to go to sleep; for if you do, why—but of course you won't.'

'What's the way across the common?' said Rosaleen imperiously.

'You'll see the path—that is, if it's not covered by the snow—a quarter of a mile farther on,' said the man; 'but don't you try it, for Heaven's sake, or you'll be lost as sure as fate.'

Rosaleen gave a mocking laugh and ran away.

'The man thinks I'm frightened just because there's a little snow,' she said to herself; 'but I'll not lose my way.'

She soon found a sign-post pointing across the common in the direction of Orchardson. There was enough light caused by the moon, which peeped now and then through the thick snow clouds, for her to see that Orchardson was six and a half miles away from that spot. Six and a half miles to Rosaleen in her present excited condition meant no distance at all.

'I'll get there in the middle of the night,' thought the child. 'I'll wake her up, and I'll give it to her. I'll frighten her; yes, I will. She'll have to give me a real sovereign. I will find her; I must find Floribel.'

Recklessly, determinedly, her heart beating high, her face aglow, she turned in the direction of the desolate moor; and the snow beat in her face and the wind howled in her ears.

CHAPTER XXX.

TO THE RESCUE.

ROSALEEN was missed in the ballroom. Nina was the first to discover her absence. She looked round to right and left in every direction. She asked this child and that child; but no one had seen the Dark Rosaleen. For two hours she had not been seen anywhere. A little partner who admired her very much came up to Nina in despair.

'Rosaleen Frere promised to dance these "Lancers" with me,' he said, 'and I cannot find her anywhere.'

Then Nina became a little anxious, although she could scarcely tell why, and went to speak to Mrs Frere.

'Have you seen Rosaleen anywhere?' she asked.

'No,' replied Mrs Frere. 'I thought she was with the rest of the children. I saw her so much during

the first hour of the dance that I am surprised I have not noticed her. Is anything the matter?'

'Perhaps she is not well; perhaps she has gone into the cloakroom,' said Nina.

Just then a small boy of the name of Davidson came up.

'Are you asking for Rosaleen Frere?' he said.

'Yes,' answered Nina. 'Have you seen her?'

'Well, I expect I danced with her one of the last,' replied the little boy; 'but that is two hours ago nearly. She said she was giddy, and wanted to go to the cloakroom.'

'Oh dear! oh dear! I wish you had told us before,' said Mrs Frere.

She and Nina now went quickly to the cloakroom. They made inquiries about Rosaleen, and the woman in charge was able partly to allay their fears. She told them that the child had not seemed well, had asked her to put her into a hansom, and had gone home.

'Now, what is to be done?' cried Mrs Frere. 'Rosaleen could not have been at all well to go home like that in the midst of all the fun. What can it mean? I ought to go back immediately to find out what is wrong, poor little darling!'

'You cannot possibly leave the ball, Mrs Frere,' said Nina. 'You know you have every one to look

after, and you are one of our hostesses. May I suggest that I might drive back—I shall not be any time—and find out about Rosaleen? I can come back later on if she is in bed and asleep. Do let me, please.'

'It would be very kind of you, Nina. I shall be very glad to allow you,' replied Mrs Frere.

Accordingly, Nina, wrapped in her warm cloak, soon found herself in a hansom driving to Dr Frere's house. She rang the bell, and one of the sleepy servants appeared.

'I want to see Miss Rosaleen,' said Nina.

'Miss Rosaleen. Oh! she's in bed and asleep a long time ago,' replied the girl.

'That is all right,' said Nina. 'When did she come back?'

'Nurse saw her. I'm sure I can't say, miss.'

'You don't know if she was ill?'

'I don't know, miss. Nurse saw her.'

'I think I'll speak to nurse for a moment,' replied Nina.

The old woman was called, and Nina spoke to her.

'We were anxious about Rosaleen,' she said; 'but Emily tells me that she has gone upstairs and is now in bed.'

'Yes,' said nurse, 'nearly two hours ago.'

'Was the child ill when she came home?'

'She was in a queer state, Miss Nina—a very queer state. Miss Rosaleen has been behaving in a very naughty way; it was her conscience that was troubling her, I think. She was in a queer state. I don't want to tell tales on her, but it had something to do with that false sovereign which was found in Dr Frere's pocket this afternoon.'

Now, Nina had been told the story of the sovereign, and was intensely interested.

'I wish you would tell me everything,' she said. 'I am very fond of Rosaleen. I am all the fonder of her because I fear she greatly dislikes me.'

'Oh, Miss Nina! few people could dislike a beautiful young lady like yourself,' cried nurse.

Nurse had a great admiration for all the Carlingfords, and for Nina in particular.

'Well, I tell you what it is,' said Nina, 'if you would rather not tell me, I'll go up and just see if Rosaleen is asleep. If she is sound asleep I won't disturb her; but if she is awake, perhaps—oh! perhaps,' added the girl, dropping her voice to a whisper—'the time I have so long waited for, when I can really do a service for the dear little Rosaleen, has come.'

'You'll go up softly, then, Miss Nina,' said nurse, 'for the poor child did seem in a dreadful state, and

came in shivering like anything. I had to hold her in my arms and cosset her up a bit by the mistress's fire; but she was quite warm when she went to bed. Only, if she is asleep, Miss Nina, it's a pity to waken her.'

'I'll be as quiet as possible,' replied Nina. 'You may trust me.'

She ran upstairs past the old woman. She turned down the corridor which led to Rosaleen's room; she knew it well. Often and often had she been there at different periods of her life. She had lived with the Freres for a couple of months once, when Rosaleen was a dark-eyed, dark-haired baby, and had begged and implored to have the pretty little girl to sleep with her, and they had slept together in that room. Yes, Nina knew it well. She turned the handle very softly; the room was in darkness. So far so good. She stepped across the carpeted floor and went close up to the bed, where she supposed Rosaleen to be lying. She stretched out her hand.

'All I want is to feel her,' she said to herself. 'Of course she is here, sound asleep; but it would satisfy me just to feel her little form.'

And Nina stretched out her hand, to find only vacancy—an empty bed—no one in it. She felt all over it; then, walking in the direction of the dressing-table, she found matches and a candle, and, striking

a light, soon discovered that the room itself was absolutely empty. The two little beds, all prepared for the night, had no occupants. Amy was figuring it with high glee and happy spirits in the ballroom; and Rosaleen—oh! where was Rosaleen?

Nina's heart beat wild with fright. She looked round the room. She knew the determined character of the unhappy little girl. She saw on the floor, one tossed here, another there, the small pretty red slippers. On the bed also were tossed the coral beads which had bound Rosaleen's dark hair. There were further traces of wild confusion in the room, but nothing to give a clue—nothing whatever.

Nina considered for a moment.

'Where can she be?' she said to herself. 'I know she is fond of going into the garden in the cold; but what does this mean? I don't want to frighten anybody. I should like to find her my own self.'

She went softly, slowly across the landing to the opposite room, where Prudence and Patience slept. She opened their wardrobe and took out of it a thick fur cloak, pinned a hat on her head, and ran softly downstairs.

Nurse, perfectly content, absolutely satisfied that her nursling was fast asleep, had returned to the warm and genial kitchen. Nina hesitated for a moment whether to tell her or not; then, feeling

that not a moment was to be lost, she went into the hall. A draught attracted her attention—a keen, cutting draught of cold air. She looked to right and left. There must be an open window somewhere. Suddenly a fresh idea came to her. She entered a room at the end of the passage, and saw that the window was wide open; this window looked into the garden.

'I cannot do much on a night like this without a lantern,' thought Nina; but she knew where to find one. In the children's room, the great big bare room where the toys were kept and the animals flourished, were a couple of old lanterns.

Nina took one down, put her candle into it, shut it, and stepped out over the sill of the open window. Holding her lantern carefully, she walked along the snow-covered garden. Soon she reached the stile at the end of the garden.

Nina got over the stile and went into the copse, and at last she also found herself on the high-road.

A man swinging a lantern was walking along. He stopped when he saw the tall girl, also holding a lantern, and standing on the snow-covered path.

'It's a bad night, miss,' he said in a tentative tone.

Nina replied coldly. She was thinking entirely

of Rosaleen, and scarcely knew that any one addressed her.

The man stopped.

'It's a queer night as well as a cold one,' he continued. 'There seem to be a lot of ghosts about.'

'What do you mean by that?' said Nina, roused by his words.

'Well, miss,' he replied, 'it's not more than an hour and a half ago that I saw a little lady stand just as you are doing, in the middle of the road. The snow had cleared for a bit, and the moon had come out, and it shone on her, and she was all white from head to foot. I spoke to her and warned her. Now, it seems queer that you, miss, should also be standing just on the same spot. I hope to the Lord you are not going to cross the moor to-night.'

Nina sprang forward and caught the man by the hand.

'Tell me,' she said—'tell me—a little girl? Was she a very dark little girl?'

'She was all a white little girl when I saw her,' answered the man, 'covered from head to foot with snow. She had a fierce voice and a determined way, and she asked me how she was to get to Orchardson, and I told her to go by the road; but she laughed

at me and said she wanted to go by the moor. I warned her not; but I don't know whether she heeded me. I was going into town to bring some medicine to my sick missus, or I would have followed her to prevent her; but my missus is mortal bad, miss, and so I couldn't wait to take care of nobody else. I hope she didn't go on the moor. I warned her not.'

'And that was how long ago?' asked Nina.

'Oh, an hour and a half ago, miss.'

'Then I tell you what,' said Nina. 'I know who that little girl was, and I am looking for her. We must search for her immediately. Will you come with me? Oh! it is so bitterly cold, and the snow falls so thickly. Can you come with me at once to search for her?'

'I cannot go with any one, miss, if there was fifty children missing, till I have taken this bottle of medicine home to my missus.'

'And how far away is that?' asked Nina, clasping her hands in despair.

'It's a matter of a mile from here,' said the man, 'just along this road, and then a sharp turn to your right; but I can't walk fast in this blinding snow. I'll wish you good-evening, miss. My poor missus is mortal bad.'

Nina uttered a cry of pain.

The man passed her swinging his lantern. She stood still for another instant. What should she do? Should she cross the moor herself, or follow the high-road?

'No, no, there is no time for that,' thought the girl. 'It would take a very little lying down in this cold to take life away; and the child—oh, the child! Oh that I might find her!'

Nina began running in the direction of Orchardson. What was Rosaleen doing there? Why did she want to cross the moor? Had she lost her senses?

Fortunately the snow had almost ceased to fall, and the moon once more put in a watery appearance. Nina went on until she came to the sign-post which described Orchardson as six and a half miles distant —the sign-post with its wooden hand pointing across the desolate moor, and pointing also down the road. Which way had Rosaleen taken?

Nina now put her lantern on the ground and began to search for footprints. Presently she uttered a cry of horror. She saw a little footprint partly covered by the fresh-fallen snow, but still quite perceptible, at the foot of an old yew-tree—a little footprint, and then another, and another—beyond doubt the footprints of a child, beyond doubt the footprints of the Dark Rosaleen; and they led straight across the moor. There were many of them, one

after the other, just as if the little feet were going fast, very fast; then, obliterated by the fresh snow, they were lost altogether.

Nina found herself several feet from the high-road, standing alone with her lantern on the desolate moor. What was she to do? How was she to find Rosaleen? She put down her lantern, raised her hand to her lips, and cried a loud, clear 'Hullo!' She made the sound several times, listening anxiously, with intense solicitude, for an answer. But none came to her—all was silence; and now the moon hid herself once more behind a bank of thick clouds, and the snow again filled the wintry air.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE SNOW.

FOR nearly half-an-hour the snow fell blindingly, and during all that time Nina stood still. At last it ceased to snow, and the moon once more put in an appearance. The girl, standing motionless, had shielded her lantern under her fur cloak. She now put it on the ground, took off the cloak, shook away the accumulated mass of snow, and put it on once more; then, holding her lantern, she went slowly and cautiously across the moor. When she had gone some three or four hundred yards she stopped and once again uttered her clear, penetrating 'Hullo!' Her voice went straight through the air, and, to her mingled amazement, horror, and delight, she heard a faint answering sound. It seemed to come from a long way off, and to be also right ahead of her. Nina walked quickly in the direction of the sound. When she had gone another hundred

yards or so she once more shouted. Again there came the answer, very faint, fainter than before; but it was nearer also. Nina went on again. Once more she shouted. Now there was no reply. This filled her with fear. She went on a little farther, and suddenly drew back with an exclamation of horror. She was on the edge of one of the old quarries with which the moor abounded. A farther step and she would have fallen headlong into this abyss. Was it possible?—oh, the horror of the thought!—was it possible that Rosaleen had come to the edge of this quarry and had fallen over in the darkness?

Nina went down on her knees, pushed her head forward over the quarry, and once more shouted; but now she altered her tone.

'Rose! Rosaleen! are you there? Answer me. It is I, Nina! Answer me, Rose! answer me!'

There was utter stillness at first, and then it seemed to Nina that she did distinctly hear a groan. This was enough for her. Somebody, whether Rosaleen or another, some living creature, was in that quarry. She walked round the upper edge, blessing the moon for giving her some light, until she found a winding path which led down into the quarry. She went down the path carefully; it was slippery and sodden by the snow, which was at this moment beginning to thaw. Fresh clouds were

banking up, and she knew that in a very short time the snow would descend once more and the moon be concealed from sight. She got to the bottom of the quarry, however, and the next instant had come across a child lying full-length in its midst. The child was lying on her back; her arms were stretched out wide; her cap had fallen from her head; her dark eyes were shut.

Oh, blessed moon! Nina looked up at it with a glance of gratitude, for it showed her the face of Rosaleen. She bent immediately over the little girl, and called, 'Rose! Rosaleen! I am here.'

'Is that you, Nina?' said Rosaleen. She opened her eyes; they had quite a sleepy look in them. She did not show a vestige of astonishment.

'Where am I? Am I in bed?' asked the Dark Rosaleen.

'No, darling; you have fallen down here, and I have come to you. Let me help you to rise. I must take you home immediately.'

As Nina spoke she laid down her lantern and put her strong arms under the little girl's shoulder.

Rosaleen uttered a scream.

'I cannot! I cannot! I am hurt,' she cried. 'I cannot stir. You must not move me. Let me lie here. I—I am hurt.'

Nina knelt by the child.

short time
the moon
bottom of
had come
idst. The
e stretched
head; her

at it with
r the face
the little
ere.'
he opened
in them.
nt.
the Dark

ere, and I
o rise. I

n and put
lder.

cried. 'I
et me lie

The child was lying on her back; her arms were stretched out wide; . . . her eyes were closed. PAGE 404

'Oh! I must raise you off this damp, damp ground,' she said. 'The snow is beginning to fall again. Come.'

'Kneel down close to me. Aren't we in bed at home? Isn't it bedtime?' asked Rosaleen.

'Come, Rose, do rouse yourself; you must not go to sleep in the snow. Come, Rose; come, dear.'

Nina was seriously alarmed now. Rosaleen was undoubtedly badly hurt by her fall. Whether a bone was broken or not it was impossible for the elder girl to tell, but she was afraid to move her; and yet to leave her in her present dangerous position would probably mean that the poor child would be dead before any succour came.

'I cannot leave her,' thought Nina; 'and down here the light of my lantern will not be seen; and —oh dear! oh dear! Well, there is *no* help for it.'

Once again the moon was hidden, and once again the snow came thick and fast. Nina placed her lantern in such a position that the snow should not quite cover the glass. She then knelt by Rosaleen, and, notwithstanding the child's groans, managed to slip her warm fur cloak partly under the little girl's frozen limbs. She then wrapped her arms round the child; and, still disregarding her groans, drew her close into her embrace.

'Is it you, Nina? What are you doing here?' asked Rosaleen.

'Taking care of you. Try and move. Wake; talk to me, Rose. Tell me why you are here. Why did you leave the ballroom? Why are you here?'

'Oh, I remember now,' said Rosaleen. 'Nina, why have you come away from the ball?'

'Well, your mother was anxious about you, and she sent me to find out what was the matter. I went to your home, and missed you. I came out to look for you. What is the matter, little Rose? Tell Nina; tell Nina for the sake of long ago.'

'The sake of long ago,' echoed the child dreamily. 'When I'——

'You were such a pretty little baby,' said Nina, 'and I used to love you so much; you used to sleep in my arms.'

Rosaleen gave a weak laugh.

'Let's pretend I'm a baby now, and asleep in your arms,' she said. 'Let's forget the big fight.'

'Oh darling! I have forgotten it long, long ago.'

'But I hated you. Do you—do you still care for me?'

'I love you.'

'That is very good of you,' said Rosaleen. She lay quite still for a minute; once more her eyes closed, then she began to talk in a dreamy, slow way.

'I wanted to find Floribel. She is a gipsy; she did a very mean, nasty, wicked thing, and I wanted

to find her. I lent her a sovereign once. I—I stole it from my own, own father. I didn't mean to steal it, but I did. It was the evening—the evening that we ran the races, Nina, and recited our pieces, and I fell, and you won. I took the sovereign. I meant to give it back again, but the gipsy tempted me. Oh, I cannot tell you any more! Oh, my back! it hurts, it hurts. Oh, my leg! Oh, my leg! The cold is so frightful. Can I get closer to you, Nina? Are you warm, Nina?'

'Quite warm,' replied Nina. 'See here, I am going to rub your leg.'

'Oh! you must not touch it. It tortures me when you touch it.'

'Tell me why you came here,' said Nina; 'rouse yourself. Even though your leg hurts you, move it; don't mind the pain. The pain isn't half as bad as the—the *no* pain. Nothing is so bad in all the world as your not feeling. Talk to me, Rosaleen; talk to me.'

'But I am so sleepy, and it is quite comf'y now you have come,' said Rosaleen.

'You must not go to sleep,' said Nina. 'Tell me why you came here.'

'Because Floribel gave me a bad sovereign, a sovereign that was no sovereign at all; and I put it into father's waistcoat-pocket. And, oh! I was so

happy; for I was a thief no longer. But it was false, and they said perhaps I'd be locked up, or perhaps father would be locked up; and I was nearly mad, and I was going across the moor to Orchardson to find Floribel.'

'But how did you get in here?'

'A man met me and told me not to go across the moor; but it was three miles shorter, and I was in a hurry, and I kept running all the way; and the moon kept hiding her face and then coming out again, and the snow kept falling; and I thought, "I will not mind the snow, nor the cold, nor anything, for my heart is burning, burning with rage;" and then all of a sudden I found myself tripping and stumbling forward, and going down, down, and then I came, with a great bang and shock, to the bottom, and I fainted from the pain. When I came to again I heard somebody shouting, and I called back. That seems a long, long time ago. I don't remember anything more. I expect I was hurt when I fell.'

'I am afraid you were. Nestle your head here against my breast. Are you comfortable?'

'Yes.'

'You don't hate me any more, little Rose?'

'Oh! I love you,' replied Rosaleen. 'That's the way with me. I am always loving or I am always hating. I love you. Why did I ever hate you?

How soft your cheek is, and so warm too, and I am so icy cold!'

Nina kissed the little girl; she breathed her warm breath on her cold cheek; she longed beyond words to have some stimulant to put between the blue little lips.

The snow once more ceased to fall, and the moon came out, and Nina was startled by the ghastly look of the child.

'Let's go to sleep,' said Rosaleen drowsily. 'What is the good of keeping awake? I am in no pain now, and why should we stay awake? Let's take a long, long sleep. Let's say "Our Father" we used to when we slept together long, long ago.'

'Yes, we will say "Our Father, which art in heaven,"' answered Nina. 'Listen to me, Rose. Keep your eyes open.'

Rosaleen opened her dark eyes wide. Nina repeated the Lord's Prayer. When she came to the sentence, 'Deliver us from evil,' she stopped. 'God will hear us,' she said. 'Now, stay perfectly quiet, Rosaleen; don't stir. I shall be back with you again. I am just going to run up to the top of the quarry and wave my lantern and shout with all my might. You'll promise to keep awake while I am away?'

'I'll promise,' answered the child.

'Be sure you do.'

'But it is very difficult, Nina. My eyes feel so heavy, and I am quite comf'y,' said Rosaleen. 'I have no pain now, and I am not angry with anybody now. Do you think God will forgive me, Nina? I have been an awfully wicked girl.'

'I think He will. I know He will,' replied Nina. 'But don't go to sleep, Rose; for if you do you may never wake again.'

Rose looked at her without quite comprehending. Nina got up trembling.

'I must do something,' she said to herself. She ran up to the top of the quarry, waved her lantern, and shouted as surely no girl ever shouted before. She then laid the lantern where it could be seen by anybody walking across the moor; but was anybody likely to cross that desolate moor on so bleak and terrible a night? She dared not leave Rosaleen another moment; she ran back to her. Alas! and alas! when she did so the child was fast asleep. Nina clasped her in her arms, shook her, whispered in her ears, breathed upon her, but all in vain; and then, overcome by a strange sensation which she had never known before, the elder girl clasped the younger tightly in her arms, and began herself to yield to the seductive and sleepy influence of the snow.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE END OF IT ALL.

THE Carlingfords and the Freres came back from the fancy ball; and then and not till then, the real alarm with regard to Rosaleen and Nina was given. Great and terrible was the excitement, and a party was immediately formed to search for both girls in the snow.

Nurse told all she could with regard to Nina's visit.

'I told her that Miss Rosaleen was asleep in her bed,' said nurse. 'It seems I was wrong.'

No one listened much to poor distracted nurse; but soon after twelve o'clock that night a search-party, well equipped with lanterns, brandy, and restoratives of every kind, started to look for the missing girls. They did not find them for a couple of hours; but Nina's lantern proved a beacon, and soon after two o'clock on that wintry morning the

two were found clasped in each other's arms, both cold, white, still, and sound asleep, at the bottom of the quarry.

The party had taken the precaution to bring a stretcher with them. This was piled with warm blankets. The girls were both laid upon it and carried home. It was a miserable home-coming when Nina Carlingford and Rosaleen Frere were brought into Dr Frere's house in the early morning. Everything possible was done for both girls; and Nina, who had been a much shorter time exposed to the influence of the snow, soon opened her eyes. She was cramped and stiff, but there was no danger whatever.

Dr Frere ordered her to be put between hot blankets, and she was laid in a bed in the very same room with Rosaleen. But for some time there was great fear with regard to the Dark Rosaleen; and when at last, after repeated efforts, and everything possible had been done, she did open her eyes, it was with a sigh of intense thankfulness that her mother bent over her.

'Oh Rose!' she said—'Rose, my little darling!'

Rosaleen looked round with a kind of wintry smile on her poor little face.

'But I have been very wicked. Is God going to forgive me?' she asked.

'Yes, dearest. Don't try to talk any more,' replied her father.

Yes, God would forgive; but the poor little girl had a bitter punishment to live through, for her leg was badly broken through her fall; and, owing to the severe exposure, inflammation set in. For days her life was despaired of. The only one in those terrible days of alarm and danger who could soothe her, who could comfort her, who could help her to bear her terrible pain, was Nina; for, beyond a slight cold, Nina had felt no bad effects from her sleep in the snow. She was determined not to leave Rosaleen, and she proved an excellent nurse, capable, full of resources, and unselfish.

Good trained nurses were called in also; but on Nina really rested the responsibility of soothing and helping the child through this dreary time.

There came a night when the Freres and the Carlingfords all thought that the Dark Rosaleen was to be taken away from them, for the fever was running high, the agony was great, and the poor child's strength was failing her.

'Oh, she must not die! she must not!' cried Amy. 'Oh, why did I ever tease her about that spelling?'

'She is my own little half-twin; it will kill me if she dies,' sobbed Fred.

And all the other children sat gloomily round and wiped away their fast-falling tears. Then into the midst of the scene came Nina.

'What is the good of going on like that?' she said.

'Going on like what?' asked Peach, raising her tear-stained face.

'Why, crying and groaning and making other people worse.'

'But we cannot help it; we have got some heart,' said Amy in an almost snappish voice.

'Don't you think that this is the time to act? Don't you think that this is the time to ask God to spare Rosaleen? Why don't you all kneel down and pray? That's the thing you ought to do. Why don't you all pray for Rosaleen instead of crying and groaning, and making yourselves quite useless?'

Nina's words had a stimulating effect. There was silence for a moment; then Prudence said in a humble tone:

'I seem to have no words; I feel quite choked with sorrow and misery. Will you pray for us, Nina?'

Nina was very shy with regard to her religious feelings; but this was not a moment to indulge in any frailty. She felt that she must act, and quickly. So she knelt down, and the other children knelt

round her; and she prayed aloud, and the others prayed in their hearts, that God would spare the Dark Rosaleen. And then Nina went softly back to the sickroom, and sat down quite comforted by the little girl's bed.

The child had fallen asleep, but the fever still ran high. Her cheeks were crimson, her respirations quick; her little hand was burning hot to touch; but Nina believed in that prayer. And when the nurse shook her head, and the doctor came in and looked grave, still the faith which that prayer had roused in her heart kept it full of hope.

'I believe there will be a turn for the better in the morning,' she said to the doctor; and the doctor looked at her in some amazement, and almost displeasure. For what could pretty Nina know about illness and danger and death?

But, after all, the doctors and the nurse were wrong, and Nina was right; for towards morning the little face calmed down, the fever-flush faded from the cheeks, and the great burning heat left the aching limbs; and before another evening passed Rosaleen was out of danger.

After this there came a slow recovery, and it was weeks and even months before the Dark Rosaleen was like her own gay self again. Nina, who was now her constant companion, begged of her mother

to let her give up her classes for this term and stay with Rosaleen.

In the spring of the year the two went away together with a nurse to the seaside; and when the Easter holidays came round once more Rosaleen was her old self.

'We'll go home for the Easter holidays,' said Nina, speaking to the little girl. 'Do you remember the Easter of last year?'

'Oh, don't I?' answered Rosaleen, her face more brilliant, more full of health than ever, her spirits as gay, her laugh as hearty; and yet a difference all over her; her eyes were thoughtful, the lips sweet, the little nature unselfish.

'Oh Nina! Nina!' she said, 'it was a year ago that our great fight began.'

'It is over for ever,' replied Nina.

'And you are my dearest, dearest friend,' said the Dark Rosaleen.

THE END.

n and stay

vent away
and when
e Rosaleen

ays,' said
remember

face more
spirits as
erence all
ps sweet,

year ago

nd,' said